

Harry Potter and the Alternate Universe: Year Six.

Chapter One

Privet Drive was quiet, the only sound being the faint twitter of birds and the whistle of wind as night descended. Harry Potter, a student of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, was a member of Slytherin House, and he was currently holed up in his Aunt and Uncles house, waiting for his Godfather Sirius Black to come and pick him up and take him to his true home at Grimmauld Place.

Harry had packed his bags earlier in the day, having nothing better to do in the oppressive Dursley household. His trunk was waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs and Hedwig, his snowy owl, was locked in her cage on his desk. Harry was currently resting on his bed; his legs propped up one on top of the other, reading a book about Advanced Magical Defences.

You might be asking yourself why Harry was even at his Aunt and Uncles house, when he could have been living with his Godfather, but Harry wasn't your average wizard. Harry was special. He was wanted, in fact, by one of the most powerful and evil wizards of all time, Lord Voldemort. And the only way Harry could stay safe outside of Hogwarts was by spending a short amount of time inside his Aunt Petunias house, the only blood relative he had left.

Harry hated it, but he understood the importance of spending the beginning of his summer holiday with his awful relatives. You see, Harry had spent five years at Hogwarts, and during those five years he had developed a close relationship with the Headmaster of the wizarding school, Albus Dumbledore. But during the last year, he had felt that Dumbledore had distanced himself, and at the end of his fifth year, only a few weeks ago, he had confronted his mentor about this.

Harry had spent the entire year knowing that Voldemort was back, knowing that he was a wanted wizard, and knowing that nobody besides Dumbledore, the Order of the Phoenix, Voldemorts Death Eaters and his best friend Draco Malfoy knew the truth. The rest of the wizarding world denied this knowledge, choosing not to believe Harry and Dumbledore when they both clearly stated that Voldemort

had returned after the Triwizard Tournament, murdering a fellow champion Cedric Diggory in the process, and nearly killing Harry.

But Harry was used to the wizarding world fearing him, and he wasn't at all surprised that they didn't believe him. Dumbledore was another thing all together, but he couldn't help that. So Harry had gone about his year as normal, studying as much as he could, learning as much as he could, so that when he eventually faced the man – if you could call the snakelike visage Voldemort now possessed a man – that had murdered his parents, he would be ready.

Harry soon discovered that he was dreaming and feeling things that Voldemort himself felt, most especially a dream where he walked down the same corridor, towards the same door, a door he had seen earlier in the year when he had to go to the Ministry of Magic for his trial.

Shortly before Christmas Harry dreamt that he was a Snake, and that he attacked a familiar person, a man with bright red hair, who was standing guard outside of the same door he kept seeing in his dreams. Harry recognised the man as Arthur Weasley, one of the Order members, the man who escorted Sirius and himself to his Ministry hearing earlier that year. Harry quickly contacted his head of house Professor Snape and told him what had happened, but unfortunately he was too late, and Arthur Weasley did not make it. After that Dumbledore told Harry that he needed to learn Occlumency, in order to keep such things from happening again. Harry knew he wasn't getting the whole truth, but decided to let it slide for now, and went to his lessons with Professor Snape as told. Regrettably, he had a hard time learning Occlumency.

During one of his end of year exams, Harry finally finished the dream, and saw Voldemort torturing his Godfather Sirius Black. He had quickly gone to Dumbledore and told him what he had seen, then demanded that Dumbledore contact Grimmauld Place to see if Sirius was okay. He was, but that was only the beginning:

“...Yes, thank you Sirius, I'm sorry to have troubled you.” Dumbledore nodded his head inside the fire, before pulling out and turning to face

Harry with that familiar twinkle in his eye. "Your Godfather is fine Harry. It was just a dream."

Harry let out a sigh of relief, but then turned his head up to meet the tall wizard's eyes. Dumbledore looked away, and Harry grimaced. "It wasn't a dream, and we both know it." Harry spoke clearly, not with anger, but annoyance.

Dumbledore cast his eyes to the floor, bringing up an old and wrinkled hand to rub his forehead.

"You are wise beyond your years Harry," Dumbledore said, but he still wouldn't meet Harry's eyes.

"I want to know what you're keeping from me," Harry said. "You haven't looked me in the eye all year. I know I'm seeing things through Voldemort's eyes and feeling what he feels. And now he just tried to lure me to Sirius's aid, when Sirius isn't even in danger. Why?"

Dumbledore sighed, but nodded his head in resignation and walked around his desk to take a seat. He motioned for Harry to do the same. Harry did.

"As you have correctly assumed," Dumbledore began. "Voldemort is indeed trying to lure you to something through your special scar connection. The room you saw was called the Hall of Prophecies, and Voldemort wants you to retrieve a prophecy for him."

"Why?"

"Because only you can Harry. Voldemort could do it himself, but he would be risking too much, and could possibly be discovered. Something I am sure he is not ready for yet. You, however, would easily be able to retrieve it, and then it would just be a simple matter of taking it from you."

"But why am I the only person who can get it?" Harry asked. "I'm assuming it's a prophecy?"

"You assume correctly." Dumbledore confirmed. "And that is why Harry. Only the people directly referred to in the prophecy can remove it, meaning, of course, either you or Voldemort himself."

"So I'm...mentioned in this prophecy?" Harry ventured.

"You are." Dumbledore nodded, then sighed again. "I think it is time I told you why Voldemort attacked your parents that night Harry, and I am sure you will not like it. I have been putting this off for too long, and I can no longer justify doing so. Please understand that I kept this from you in what I believed was your best interest."

Harry scowled a little, but nodded. "Go on."

That night Dumbledore told Harry about the prophecy, about how he would have to either kill Voldemort, or be killed by him. Harry was indeed angry that Dumbledore had kept this from him, but not as angry as Dumbledore seemed to expect, because the old wizard seemed a bit relieved. Harry left the Headmasters Office with a lot of questions and some very disturbing suspicions.

Instead of going back to the Slytherin dormitory, Harry headed for his own secret liar, a place he had found in his third year, after much searching. His liar was in fact a secret chamber like the Chamber of Secrets (which was also what gave him reason to start examining the castle more thoroughly) belonging to Salazar Slytherin, and it, like the Chamber of Secrets, was also only accessible through Parsletongue.

Inside Salazar's hidden chamber was a bedroom, a library full of books on the Dark Arts, amongst other things, and even a large training room full of magical training objects. For example, a puppet that responded to the touch of a wand, enabling whoever was using the room to fire of spells and increase his accuracy by attempting to hit the moving puppet. Harry also found a number of Salazar's personal belongings, including a musty diary that was practically falling to pieces, the words hardly legible anymore. Harry also found many secret doors within the chamber that allowed him to move about the school, leading to all kinds of places, including Professor Snapes office and even the Gryffindor head of house Professor McGonagalls office.

Harry spent a lot of time here, and this was where he came after meeting with Dumbledore, taking a seat at Salazar Slytherins desk and losing himself in thought. A number of little things started to add up, and Harry found himself reaching a disturbing thought. Professor Snape, Dumbledores double agent, was a spy for Voldemort. Could it really be true? Harry didn't know whether to believe it or not, but it did make a lot of sense.

Snape tried to have Sirius's soul sucked out of him by the Dementors in his third year, not even an hour after Harry had found out the truth, but that could easily be explained away. Snape hated Sirius. It didn't necessarily mean that he was a spy for Voldemort.

But then again, Professor Snape was the one Harry went to and told about Arthur Weasleys situation. Was it really too late? Or did Professor Snape delay in telling Dumbledore, so that Arthur would die before anyone could get to him.

And then when Harry had to learn Occlumency, was it just a coincidence that he was having trouble with it, or was it because Snape was somehow sabotaging him so that his Master, Lord Voldemort, could lure Harry to the Hall of Prophecies?

Harry didn't know what to believe, but since then he had taken a personal interest in learning Occlumency by himself, looking through every book he had, searching the school library and even Salazar's personal collection.

Last year was also the year he confronted Draco about his true allegiance. That was also an interesting conversation:

Harry was sitting at Salazar's desk again, doing some last minute homework, whilst Draco was playing himself (don't ask me how) at wizard's chess over on the bed. Harry grinned as he heard one of Draco's knights take out a pawn, Draco cheering it on. He set his quill down on his parchment and turned to watch Draco. His best friend was completely engrossed in his game, and didn't even notice Harry watching him.

Harry was overcome with emotion, thought he didn't show it. Truth be told, Draco was the only friend he had. It was a strange thing, really,

his friendship with the young Malfoy. On the surface, Draco was just like Dudley Dursley, Harry's bully of a cousin, but underneath it all, Draco was totally different.

When Harry had first come to Hogwarts he had been weary of Draco, but his determination to become strong enough to defeat Voldemort had placed him in Slytherin, and he didn't want to make any unnecessary enemies. So he was civil to Draco. Draco, on the other hand, seemed to go out of his way to befriend Harry, especially in their second year. He succeeded, but not because of whom he was, but who Harry knew he could be. When Harry went into the Chamber of Secrets to save Ginny Weasley, Draco went with him, determined to stick by Harry's side. In doing so, Harry saw the man Draco could be, if only he could disregard his father's ways.

And slowly but surely, Draco had done just that. Sure, he was still a bit of git, but Harry wasn't picky. Deep down, Draco was a good guy, and that was enough for him. But something needed to be cleared up, because at that moment Harry truly felt he had a friend. But would Draco really be loyal to him? Even over his own father?

"Draco?" Harry broke the silence of the chamber.

Draco looked up, frowning. "Yeah?"

"I need to ask you something." Harry began. "It's serious, and very important, okay?"

"Okay." Draco nodded, still frowning.

"I've never pressured you about this, you know that, but it's getting to the point where we can't ignore it anymore..."

"Bloody hell Harry, would you just ask the question already?" Draco snapped, though he was smirking slightly, letting Harry know he wasn't really mad.

Harry chuckled and nodded. "Okay." He took a breath. "I need to know where your loyalty lies. With me? Or with Voldemort and your Father?"

Draco's eyes widened a fraction, almost impossible to notice if you didn't know Draco, and he sat up. He took a breath as well and ran a hand through his silvery hair. He looked down at the chessboard before him. Harry gave him the time he needed, knowing this wasn't something to be taken lightly. When he finally looked up, he gave Harry a shaky smile, not his usual smirk, but an actual smile.

"My loyalty is with you Harry." Draco murmured. "Damn, I sound like a stupid Hufflepuff, but I swear to you, I'm with you."

Harry smiled back. "Thanks Draco."

Harry knew that Draco was telling the truth. He could see it in the boy's eyes. Draco was loyal to him, not his father. Harry had at least succeeded in that.

Harry closed the book he was reading, setting it down on the table beside his bed and getting up to stretch his legs. He walked to the window and peered out, looking for any sign of Sirius. Nothing. He turned to face Hedwig and found his faithful owl regarding him with her amber eyes.

"You hungry girl?" Harry asked, walking over and rummaging through a bag on the side, which was full of owl treats. He opened her cage and gave her one, whilst stroking her head absentmindedly. The lights from the lamppost outside his window caught his attention and he turned, rushing over to the window. Yes, every one of the other lampposts had gone out as well. Sirius was here.

He quickly shuttered Hedwig back in her cage, grabbed his discarded book, and rushed out of his room, hurtling downstairs just as the doorbell chimed. He opened the door to find Sirius waiting for him with a big grin on his handsome face.

"Harry." He greeted, grabbing him in a quick hug.

Harry smiled back at his Godfather and looked past him to find more familiar faces, including Remus Lupin, Nymphadora Tonks and Mad Eye Moody.

“Harry.” Remus echoed Sirius greeting, offering his hand. Harry shook it.

“Wotcher Harry.” Tonks added, winking at him. Harry smiled slightly in response.

“Here, are they.” His Uncles grumbling voice came from behind him.

Harry turned and smirked at his Uncle. “How observant of you.”

His Uncle started to turn purple, but before he could say anything in response, Sirius spoke up.

“Ready to go?”

“Yeah,” Harry motioned to his trunk. “Just need help with that.”

“We’ll take them,” Tonks said, walking into the house and shrinking the large trunk down to pocket size with a flick of her wrist. She pocketed it. She motioned Harry out of the house and followed him. The door shut with a bang behind them.

“Remus, Alastor and Tonks will take your stuff Harry.” Sirius told him.

Harry handed Hedwig over to Remus.

“You ever side along Apparate before?”

Harry shook his head no.

“It’s really easy,” Sirius assured him. “Just grab hold and don’t let go. Ready?”

Harry grabbed onto Sirius. “Ready.”

And with a slight *crack*, they disappeared.

They reappeared outside of number twelve Grimmauld Place. The night was darker still, and Harry could hardly see the dark house that loomed before him. Only previous knowledge of it’s existence made it possible for him to see it, and he was sure that if he didn’t know he wouldn’t have been able to. He wondered idly if that was part of the

Fidelius Charm or not. Either way, he followed Sirius up the dark lawn and into the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix.

The first thing Harry did when he entered the house was check if Mrs. Black's portrait was still there, and he let out a sigh of relief when it wasn't. He turned and raised an eyebrow at Sirius.

"How'd you get it off?"

"With a lot of effort." Sirius said with a grin. "It was the last thing we did to make this damn house friendly, and I think you'll agree it's a hell of a lot better. Wait until you see your room, I know it was pretty horrible before, but I've finally had time to do something with it. I'm sure you'll love it."

"I can't wait," Harry said, looking around at the mostly clean house. "It already looks different from last time I was here." Harry looked back to Sirius, who was still grinning at him. "It's great to be home."

Sirius grin only got wider. The sound of a door opening down the corridor caught his attention and he turned to see Molly Weasley coming towards them. She looked a little worn out and tired, and her smile didn't reach her eyes, but that was to be expected. Harry still felt a little guilty about what happened to her husband. He was a little weary about how she would respond to him.

The last time they had met, which was last year; she had been very nice to him, even going such lengths as stuffing food down his throat to fatten him up. He just assumed she was one of those Motherly types that can't help but fuss over everyone. But now, with his involvement in Arthur's death, he wasn't sure how she would react to him.

"Oh good," she said, wiping her hand on her apron. "I'm glad your back. We're just waiting for the others to get back and then the meeting will start. I've made a casserole, why don't you go help yourself to some Sirius."

Sirius looked at her for a moment before nodding and leaving him alone with Mrs. Weasley. Harry looked at her expectantly, not letting her see how nervous he was. He actually really liked Molly Weasley,

and the thought of her resenting him for what happened last year scared him more than he expected. He was relieved when she smiled at him.

"How are you Harry?"

"Okay." Harry replied.

"Good." She looked over her shoulder, obviously wanting to talk to him privately. "Listen Harry dear, I just wanted to let you know, I don't want you to feel guilty for what happened...you know, with Arthur." She sniffed and wiped at her eyes. "It wasn't your fault."

No, it certainly wasn't, Harry thought, his mind once again going back to Snape.

"Thank you Mrs. Weasley." Harry said, and he meant it. "I'm just sorry I couldn't prevent it."

"Oh no dear," Mrs. Weasley said. "That's very sweet of you, but you did all you could."

The door behind Harry opened and Remus, Tonks and Mad Eye Moody appeared, carrying Harry's stuff. Mrs. Weasley patted Harry on the arm comfortingly and greeted them.

"The meetings ready to start now, just go on through." She told them.

Mad Eye nodded and left, followed by Remus, who also patted Harry on the arm as he passed, much like Mrs. Weasley had done. Tonks handed over his shrunken trunk and motioned up the stairs.

"Shall we?"

Harry nodded, gave Mrs. Weasley one last smile, and then followed Tonks up the stairs to his room.

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Two

Malfoy Manor was located on the outskirts of a small wizarding village that was hidden in the valley of two large mountains, and it resided rather precariously looking on the ledge of one of the mountains, overlooking the village. Despite its hazardous looking location, it was in fact completely safe, due to the magical energy holding it together, along with the Malfoys own protective wards.

The house itself was large, spanning almost the whole width of the mountainside ledge, and made of archaic looking cold stone slabs, making it look more like a castle than a house. The house had two wings, and in the second wing, Draco Malfoy sat on his bed, doing some extra homework, and currently chewing on the end of his quill.

His room was smaller than one would think befit a Malfoy, but larger than most kids his age, and was actually quite bare. Draco didn't really keep a lot of his possession in his room; most of it was stored away in another room next to his. The only objects in the room were his bed, a hefty dresser and wardrobe combo, and a green and fluffy looking rug that covered most of the cold stone floor. His bed was also coloured a similar green, lined with silver, obviously Draco's favourite colours – the Slytherin colours.

He was so engrossed in doing his homework that he didn't even hear the echoing footsteps coming towards his room, and in turn, he jumped and almost swallowed his quill when his Father, Lucius Malfoy, barged into the room with a bang, the doors smashing against the wall loudly. He was carrying his serpent headed staff, which secretly incorporated his wand, and had his nose upturned as he stopped before Draco, looking down at his son with cold grey eyes, his black robes falling still at his feet.

Draco fought hard not to gulp, and just about succeeded, as he turned his eyes up to his fathers pale pointed face.

"Yes Father?" Draco queried curiously.

"What do you think you dolt?" Lucius snapped. "Report - now!"

This time Draco did gulp, visibly and audibly. Lucius sneered at his son's sign of weakness.

"You mean on Harry, sir?" Draco asked, needing clarification.

"I swear boy," Lucius growled. "They must have switched you at birth with a stupid muggle, because there is no way you could be a Malfoy. Yes, Potter, now hurry up!"

"Sorry," Draco gulped again. "I'm sorry sir, but I don't have anything to report. Harry - "

"What do you mean 'nothing to report'?" Lucius raged. "You have spent four years getting to know that little runt, have you not? You must know something. He does not tell you anything of his meetings with Dumbledore, or of the Prophecy?"

"Prophecy?" Draco looked confused.

"Answer me boy!"

"I'm sorry sir," Draco repeated. "Harry is a really private person. He considers me his best friend sir, but even I hardly know him. I'm sorry."

Lucius growled again, his frustration with his only son evident. He ran a hand through his long silver hair and turned around, as if looking at Draco pained him. He squared his shoulders and grit his teeth together, clutching his staff tighter. Draco tensed in anticipation of what was to come.

"You have failed me again Draco." Lucius said. "I am disappointed. I was going to recommend you to the Dark Lord to be one of the new Death Eaters, but to do so would be an embarrassment. And to think I hoped that he would give *you* the special assignment..." Lucius sighed.

"I'm sorry Father." Draco whispered, lowering his head in shame, trying to fight back tears. He knew what was coming.

"*Crucio!*"

(--)

Tonks led Harry up the stairs to the second floor, down the formerly dark and mouldy corridor that now actually shone with warmth from the many magically lit torches along the way, past three sets of mahogany doors, and finally came to rest at Harry's room, which had a new sign stuck to the front of the door that read: 'Boy-Who-Lived's Room'. Harry smiled to himself at the sign before turning to face Tonks, who grinned at him.

"Like the sign?" She said. "It was Sirius's idea."

"Hilarious." Harry said dryly. Tonks laughed out loud and handed him his shrunken trunk.

"Hope you like the rest of it as much as the door." She called back to him cheerfully as she walked away, leaving him standing outside his new room.

Harry shook his head to himself and entered the room, dropping his trunk on the floor and flicking his wand at it to return it to normal size. He put Hedwig's cage on a nearby table and then surveyed the room. In a rather out of character action, he found himself laughing out loud when he saw that his room was painted predominantly with the colours Red and Gold – the Gryffindor colours.

Obviously, it was Sirius's idea of a joke, knowing that Harry was a Slytherin, not a Gryffindor. It was one of the many things Sirius joked about with him, the fact that he was a traitor to the legacy of the Marauders by being in Slytherin and not in Gryffindor like his parents and godfather. Harry shook his head in amusement and turned his attention to the rest of the room.

It was small and cosy, just the way he liked it, and the warm colours only helped matters. He wasn't used to a bedroom like this, generally Slytherin slept in cold rooms, but Harry certainly saw the pleasure in it. His bed was shoved far up in the corner, wedged in by a tiny side table mounted by a lamp. He noticed a book placed on the table and decided to look at it later.

At the foot of his bed was a large expensive looking wardrobe made of oak that almost seemed to merge with the bed. Placed right next to the wardrobe was the table on which he had placed Hedwig's cage. The walls of the room had also been plastered neatly with posters of a Quidditch team, and on closer inspection he found them to be the Chudley Cannons. Harry also noticed his Firebolt had been mounted on the wall by two strategically placed holders. All in all, it was a pretty nice room.

Harry shoved his trunk under his bed and then sat down on the bed, bouncing on it to test its give, finding it to his liking. He then grabbed the book and examined the cover. It read: *'Flying with the Cannons.'* Harry figured it was Sirius's favourite team.

Deciding to unpack his trunk later, Harry placed the book back on the side table and left the room, heading towards the door across the hall from him - the bathroom. Just as he was exiting his room though, the bathroom door opened and a tall red haired figure emerged. It was Ron Weasley.

Ron's eyes widened at the sight of Harry, before narrowing to dangerous slits. Harry just regarded him curiously. Ron had always been very hostile to Harry, especially after he became the new Gryffindor Seeker in his second year, counterpart to Harry, who was the Slytherin Seeker. He seemed to think that Harry was his arch-nemesis or something, when in reality Harry couldn't care less. No doubt that probably infuriated the red head more, but that was just Harry's nature.

"What are you doing here?" Ron practically snarled.

Harry looked around, making sure he was actually in Grimmauld Place, before turning back to Ron with a raised eyebrow. "This is my home you know."

Ron went slightly red, but never took his narrowed blue eyes off Harry.

"This is the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix, I don't see why they let a Dark Wizard like you live here. Seems a bit stupid to me."

Harry shrugged and made to walk passed Ron, but Ron grabbed his arm before he could pass and snarled once again:

"I know you killed my dad."

Harry yanked his arm out of Ron's grip and made to walk off again, but Ron grabbed him again and spun him around, reaching for his wand. Before he could even touch the tip, he felt Harry's own wand pressing into the hollow of his throat.

"Don't." Harry said.

"Screw you." Ron replied, but he didn't move his arms, and again locked eyes with Harry. "I know what you did. You're just like You Know Who. I don't know why everyone else can't see it, but I can."

"Believe me," Harry began. "You're not the only one who thinks so."

Ron's eyes narrowed even further, but before he could reply another voice interrupted them.

"What the hell is going on?" It was Ginny Weasley.

The younger red head stomped over to them and attempted to get between them. Ron shoved her aside, and in the confusion of the scuffle, he managed to raise his own wand and point it at Harry.

"Stop it!" Ginny shouted.

"He killed dad!" Ron argued to his sister. Harry noticed his shoulders start to shake as the boy was overcome with emotion.

"Bloody Hell."

Two simultaneous voices cut in at the exact same time. The Weasley twins appeared behind Ron and quickly grabbed him, one around the waist and the other, his arm, so that he couldn't cast any spells. They dragged him away and all the while he was screaming at Harry, accusing him, his eyes spilling tears now, until finally he was shoved into a room down the hall and the door slammed shut behind the Weasley twins as they followed him.

Harry finally lowered his wand, but didn't pocket it. He heard Ginny sigh and turned his head to face her. She looked up at him and gave him a slightly shaky, nervous smile. Harry wasn't surprised; most people regarded him with a little fear.

"Sorry about Ron." She whispered, her red hair falling down to hide her face as she lowered her head.

"It's okay." Harry said, and he finally pocketed his wand. He walked over to the bathroom door, stopping with his hand on the doorknob. "I didn't kill your father."

"I know," Ginny assured him. "And Ron knows too. He's just...he needs someone to blame..."

"I'm sorry I couldn't save him."

Silence. Then:

"I know." But her words fell on deaf ears as the bathroom door shut with a bang. Ginny sighed and went to join her brothers.

(--)

When Harry emerged from the bathroom only minutes later he heard voices chattering low coming from down the hall. Figuring the meeting was over; he headed over and started down the steps, just in time to see Mad Eye Moody leave through the front door. As he reached the landing, Professor Snape appeared from the kitchen, stopping at the bottom of the stairs, and raising his eyes to meet Harry's.

"Potter." Snape gave a curt nod.

"Professor." Harry returned.

Snape studied Harry for a moment longer, as if trying to read his mind, and Harry figured that Snape was trying to use Legilimency against him. Harry did his best to throw up his weak (but improving) Occlumency Shields. Snape frowned at him for a moment, and then gave him another curt nod.

“Not bad Potter.”

“Thank you Professor.”

Snape whirled his cloak around him and turned, exiting through the front door without even a second glance at Harry. The door shut with a bang behind him and Harry relaxed. He hoped Snape hadn't been able to his doubts about the man's loyalty, but there was really no way to be sure. Shrugging away those thoughts, Harry went over to the kitchen door and knocked once before entering.

Harry entered the room to find Sirius and Mrs. Weasley sitting around the dining table, Sirius with a bowl of casserole in front of him. Harry turned his attention to the only other person in the room, Dumbledore, who was hovering near the fireplace.

“Harry,” Sirius said, kicking out one of chairs at the table. “Take a seat. Have some casserole. It's good.” Sirius licked his lips for good measure and grinned.

Harry sat down, but didn't touch the bowl of casserole put in front of him by Mrs. Weasley - he just stared at Dumbledore. Dumbledore turned to look him in the eye.

“I take it you have questions Harry,” Dumbledore said, that familiar twinkle in his eye.

“What was the meeting about?” Harry asked bluntly, getting to the point.

Mrs. Weasley frowned and looked at Dumbledore, then Sirius, and back to Dumbledore. Harry didn't notice this; he was still staring at Dumbledore. Dumbledore opened his mouth to respond but was interrupted before he could even begin.

“Surely you're not going to tell him Dumbledore.” Mrs. Weasley said, still frowning.

“Why not?” Sirius asked, putting down his knife and fork and looking across the table at Molly.

"He's just a boy!" Molly argued.

"Quite right Molly," Dumbledore said, still looking back at Harry. "But he is, in fact, the boy who will have to face Voldemort, in the end. He has a right to know."

"But - " Mrs. Weasley spluttered, sighed, and then sat back in her seat, still frowning, but quiet.

"So?" Harry pressed.

"It was just a routine meeting Harry." Dumbledore told him. "We have nothing to report, I'm sorry to say. But I assure you, Harry, when we do, you will be informed. I promise you."

Harry sighed and ran a hand through his messy raven coloured hair. "Okay."

"Now," Dumbledore announced, straightening up. "If I could have a word Harry. Privately. This way." Dumbledore motioned to the door in which Harry came through, then followed Harry as he got up and left.

Dumbledore shut the door to the kitchen behind them and turned to regard Harry once again. He set his hands on Harry's shoulders and looked him in the eye.

"How are you Harry?"

"I'm fine." Harry replied, a little puzzled.

"Good." Dumbledore pulled back a little. "I want you to know that I regret having to send you to your Aunt and Uncles every year. If I had known, well..." Dumbledore trailed off, looking away. When he looked back at Harry, he continued. "But I daresay that you have turned out better than I could have hoped, given your situation."

"Is there a point to this sir?" Harry asked, not disrespectfully, but with curiosity.

"Right. The point. The point is Harry, I'm proud of you. That being said, I would like to inform you that you will be having private lessons

with me this year. The time is drawing nearer, whether we like it or not, and I think it's best if you were prepared, don't you?"

Harry nodded.

"Good. Now then, I'm afraid I must be going, but I am sure I will be seeing you again before you return to Hogwarts. Have a good summer Harry."

Dumbledore said goodbye to Sirius and Mrs. Weasley, then left through the front door, leaving Harry standing in the front lobby, pondering whether he should have told Dumbledore about his suspicions regarding Professor Snape.

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Three

Hermione Granger appeared to be just like every normal girl her age, albeit with a higher focus on studying and lesser focus on partying than most girls her age. However, she wasn't as normal as she appeared. Hermione Granger was a witch, the smartest witch in her year in fact, and attended Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

When she first found out she was a witch she was ecstatic, and her parents as well, who had always been very encouraging and supportive with Hermione. She had begged her parents to take her to get her school things as soon as possible, and the next day they had gone to Diagon Alley, and purchased everything she would need for her first year. Hermione spent the entire summer reading her schoolbooks, and even a few extra she had managed to wheedle out of her parents.

The most fascinating thing she read was in *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts*. The book detailed all of the Dark Wizards over the last ten centuries, and even though she was a little bit scared of the idea of a Dark Wizard, she couldn't have been more eager about getting to Hogwarts.

The reason Hermione was so eager was simple. Harry Potter would be on her year. She had done all the calculations and was sure that the Boy Who Lived was roughly the same age as her. Therefore, he had to be in her year, didn't he?

She couldn't wait to meet him. Her mind came up fantasy upon fantasy about how the two of them would become best friends. He had to be smart and powerful, after all, he was the only known person to survive the Killing Curse, so she was sure they would get along.

One would wonder why Hermione was so thrilled about the idea of going to a new school, far away from her parents and friends, all alone in a totally new environment. But the truth was, Hermione didn't really have any friends. Most of the children her age either picked on her or ignored her. Hermione knew it was because she liked to read books and do well in school. Children can be very mean and Hermione knew this from first hand experience. But going to

Hogwarts gave her a fresh start and Hermione had high hopes. These people would be like her, so she would fit in, wouldn't she?

Unfortunately, Hermione wasn't right this time. When she got on the train she felt suddenly alone. She entered compartment after compartment, trying to find a place to sit. The older students didn't want her sitting with them. Some of them even sneered at her and called her a Mudblood. She didn't know what that meant, but it didn't sound very nice. She entered the last compartment to find a boy with messy black hair and glasses talking to another boy with sleek silver hair, flanked by two big boys that looked quite scary to Hermione.

"Oh," the young eleven-year-old Hermione exclaimed. "I'm sorry. Everywhere else is full. Can I sit here?"

The silver haired boy looked at her with narrowed eyes whilst the other boy picked up a book and started reading. Had he even noticed her standing here?

"You're a muggleborn aren't you?" The silver haired boy asked.

"Erm...My parents are muggles...yes." Hermione answered.

The boy sneered at her. "Sorry, this compartment is full." He didn't sound sorry at all.

"But - " Hermione trailed off, looking to the other boy for support.

"Go on then Mudblood," the silver haired boy drawled. "Get out of here."

Hermione looked to the other boy again, this time catching his eyes over the rim of his book, but he just looked back at her. Hermione felt tears welling in her eyes, so she quickly turned on her heel and left the compartment with a sniff, hearing the silver haired boy with the drawling voice laugh behind her, before the door closed with a snap. She wiped at her eyes and looked up, spotting another boy sitting on the floor a bit further down the hall holding a struggling toad. He looked up at her and blushed a little, catching her crying. She wiped her eyes more firmly and went to walk away when she heard him speak.

"You can't find a compartment either?" he asked, timidly.

"No." she whispered.

"You can sit here...if you like." He murmured.

Hermione turned around and walked over to him, sitting down gingerly by his side.

"I'm Neville." He introduced himself.

"Hermione."

And that was how she met Neville, pretty much her only real friend at Hogwarts. But, on the bright side, at least it was better than public school. She later learned the boys in the last compartment she tried where called Draco Malfoy and, much to Hermiones dismay, Harry Potter. They were both sorted into Slytherin, whilst she joined Neville in Gryffindor.

Things hadn't changed much since then. She spent most of her time studying in the library. She didn't really make any friends, except for Neville. Parvati and Lavender were okay, but they weren't really here friends. Maybe she would have made some, but after her experience in her first year, when a Mountain Troll attacked her, she became a very reserved person, hardly talking to anyone for at least a year. Her parents even considered pulling her from school. She was extremely lucky her Professors got there in time to save her life, but unfortunately she did suffer some bad injuries. Even now her arm wouldn't straighten completely and she still walked with a slight limp.

Hermione didn't like to think about it.

"Hermione dear, are you okay?" her Mothers voice interrupted her wandering mind. "You look a thousand miles away."

They were sitting at a table in a café in France, waiting for their coffees to arrive and her Father to return from his own personal shopping trip. Hermiones Mother, Mrs. Jane Granger, was waving her hand in front of her daughters face.

"Sorry mum," Hermione replied. "I think I was a thousand miles away. What were you saying?"

"I was just asking you how school is going."

"Oh, it's okay, I'm doing my best." Hermione assured her Mother.

"And your friend...what's his name...Neville?"

"He's good."

"You haven't made any new friends yet?"

"It's hard for me mum," Hermione began.

"I know honey, and I'm not pushing you, but you really ought to try." Mrs. Granger advised.

"I'll try." Hermione whispered.

"I know you will honey. How about those...Quiddit games...you could go to one of those, try to socialise a little bit."

"Yeah, maybe I will."

In truth, Hermione wasn't a big Quidditch fan, and the only times she ever went was Neville asked her to go with him. She didn't mind, it wasn't that bad, and it was good to watch Harry Potter fly. She almost blushed at the thought. Like most girls at Hogwarts, Hermione was in awe of Harry Potter.

As she expected, he was very powerful and very smart, but that was about the only thing she knew about him. He wasn't a very forthcoming person. In fact, he was quite mysterious, which Hermione was sure why most girls liked him. He didn't really socialise either, choosing to stay out the spotlight, and Hermione would wonder why he liked playing Quidditch so much, but she only had to watch him to know the answer. He clearly loved it. And with his strange talent of being able to make himself disappear, she was sure he could easily avoid the crowd. Sometimes days went by and nobody would see Harry, except for in classes. Most people regarded him with fear as

well as admiration. He was almost too powerful and it scared people. The fact he was in Slytherin didn't help. Hermione had even heard people suggest he might be the next Dark Lord himself. Hermione wasn't sure.

But one thing was for sure. Harry Potter was definitely an interesting character. Could you blame her for having the occasional daydream about him? She had been daydreaming about him before they even met, fantasising about being his friend, and lately, something more. But that's all it was - a fantasy. He didn't even know she existed.

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Four

Harry saw Dumbledore five more times during his stay at Grimmauld place. The first time was for another routine meeting, and then same again for the last three times. It was the second time that was most interesting, when Dumbledore enlisted Harry into coercing an old friend into coming back to teach at Hogwarts.

Dumbledore told Harry all about Horace Slughorn whilst on route to the old wizards current home. Harry quickly figured out why Dumbledore was bringing him along, so when he met Horace Slughorn for the first time, he made sure to be as charming as he could, and temped Slughorn just enough to get the old wizard to agree to come back to Hogwarts.

That was the only really interesting thing Harry did all summer, and to be honest, it wasn't all that interested. In fact, Harry began to wonder if he'd not just released an even bigger pain in his ass than Gilderoy Lockhart had been. No doubt Slughorn would try to collect him, so Harry would have to take pains to be even stealthier than he normally was.

The rest of the summer passed rather quickly. Harry did his best to avoid Ron and the rest of the Weasley family, save Mrs. Weasley, and did quite a good job, owing to his large experience in being invisible. The rest of Harry's time went to being with Sirius, either listening to Sirius talk about his father and the rest of the Marauders and their numerous pranks or playing wizards chest.

But it was finally time to leave Grimmauld place and head back to Hogwarts for another year. Like last year, Harry had to walk to Kings Cross with various guards, including Remus Lupin, Sirius, and Tonks. Again, like the year before, Mad Eye Moody was in charge of taking their possessions to the train. The Weasley family led the group, with Harry and Sirius in the middle and Remus and Tonks bringing up the rear. Every now and then Ron turned his head back at Harry and glared. Harry ignored him.

They reached the train station with no trouble and passed through the invisible barrier to platform 9 and $\frac{3}{4}$. Sirius and Remus shook Harrys hand before he got on the train and left them behind. He didn't have a

clue where the Weasleys had gotten too, and frankly, didn't care. He quickly spotted a familiar silver head over the crowd and pushed his way through the crowd, jostling people out of his way with annoyance. Before he could reach Draco the door to the compartment he was passing opened and a slightly bushy haired girl bumped into him. He took a step back and retightened his glasses, which had gone a little wonky in the collision, and stared at the girl before him.

"Sorry," she said, but she didn't meet his eyes, keeping her eyes down. Harry frowned, shrugged, and brushed past her.

"It's okay." He called back dismissively.

He completely missed the girl startle and turn, looking at his back. Hermione Granger stared at the back of Harry Potter's head as he again disappeared in the crowd.

Harry finally met Draco towards the end of the train, walking up next to Draco, making his best friend jump a little.

"Bloody hell," Draco gasped, something that would have shocked most of the population of Hogwarts. Draco Malfoy do anything other than sneer? Yeah right. "I swear Potter, someone should put a ringing charm on you."

Harry smirked a little. "Or maybe you just need to pay more attention."

Draco scowled at him in good nature and pointed to an empty compartment. "Come on." He pushed open the door and took a seat near the door. Harry took one at the far side, by the window. He looked out, his eyes scanning the bustling crowd of parents, then turned his attention to Draco.

Harry and Draco sat in silence, each lost in their own heads, until finally the train started to move. Harry looked out the window, watching the parents left on the platform slowly get smaller, and then disappear around the bend.

"So Harry," Draco said. "Do anything interesting over the summer?"

“Interesting isn’t the word.” Draco raised a fine eyebrow at him. “I met our new Potions teacher.”

“New Potions teacher?” Draco asked, curious. “What about Snape?”

“Seems he’s finally got the Defence job.” Harry replied.

“That’ll be interesting,” Draco said dryly. “So what’s the new Potions Professor like?”

“Fat, Bold, Annoying.” Harry said sardonically, locking eyes with Draco.

Draco burst out laughing. “Nice.”

Before the conversation could continue a timid knock came at the door, before it opened to reveal what must have been a first year girl. She was extremely short, even for a first year, and had her hair drawn up in pigtails. She looked nervously between Harry and Draco, and then gulped when Draco glared at her.

“What?” Draco asked with a bored tone.

“I-I j-just need to t-tell...” the poor girl gulped again and her eyes darted to Harry, who wasn’t even paying attention. Or at least it didn’t look like he was. “Tell H-Harry P-P-Potter that Professor S-Slughorn wants t-to see him. Please.” She looked down at her feet.

“No.”

The girl looked up, looking at Harry, who was now reading a book he seemed to have pulled out of nowhere.

“I don’t think he’s interested.” Draco said with a smirk. Draco pointed to the door.

“But - ”

“Don’t make me be mean.” Draco drawled, narrowing his eyes at her. She squeaked and left the room, or rather, fled the room.

Draco turned to Harry with a smirk. "I bet you ten Galleons she's in Hufflepuff."

Harry snorted. "Okay then." Harry was pretty sure he'd lose, but what the hell, it'd be funny. "What about you?"

"Huh?" Draco looked at Harry, confused.

"Anything interesting happen to you over the summer?" Harry explained.

"Oh," Draco ran a hand through his sleek hair. "You could say that." At Harry's imploring look, he continued. "My dad tried to get me to spill information on you. I didn't tell him anything, obviously. Not that I really know much. He said something about..." Draco trailed off, thinking.

Harry regarded him with curiosity, sitting up in his seat now, his book forgotten.

"He said something about how he was going to recommend me as one of the new Death Eaters." Harry's eyes got slightly larger. "And...something about a special assignment he was going to suggest me for. I'm figuring it's something at Hogwarts that the Dark Lord wants doing. What? I have no idea."

"That's really interesting." Harry said, sitting back and looking thoughtful. "Guess you win."

Draco smirked. "I guess. Sorry I couldn't get more out of him, but...let's just say father wasn't very pleased with me." Draco looked away from Harry's sympathetic eyes.

"Well," Harry finally said, knowing that pressing Draco for more would only embarrass his friend. "At least it's something. We'll have to keep an eye out."

"You going to tell Dumbledore?" Draco asked.

"Maybe."

They fell into another comfortable silence after that, Harry retreating to his book again and Draco taking out his wand, idling practising some little spells. They must have been nearing Hogwarts when the compartment door opened again and three people entered, a boy and two girls.

The boy was tall, coloured and had high cheekbones, with his hair spiked up a little at the front. His name was Blaise Zabini. The first girl was Pansy Parkinson, a Slytherin girl who always showed excessive interest in Draco, much to Blaise's amusement. Finally, the second girl was named Heather Pritchard, a pretty Slytherin girl who was friends with Pansy. She had short black hair that framed her round face and startling blue eyes with scarily long eyelashes, or so Harry always thought.

"Malfoy." Blaise greeted them, sitting across from Draco. "Potter."

Harry nodded his head in greeting, but didn't take his eye off his book. Heather sat down next to him, way too close for Harry's comfort, and leant towards him, as if trying to read his book, though she wasn't even looking at it, but glancing straight at Harry's face, batting her scary eyelashes.

Meanwhile, Pansy perched herself on Draco's lap, only to be pushed off irritably by the annoyed Malfoy. Blaise sniggered and leant back in his seat, watching with great amusement as the two girls practically threw themselves at Harry and Draco.

"Big you miss me Draco?" Pansy cooed, stroking his arm.

Draco sighed. "Not in a million years Parkinson."

"Oh, you're no fun." She pouted.

"Then piss off."

Blaise laughed out loud and Pansy glared at him. "Smooth Malfoy."

"And how are you Harry?" Heather asked in her best sweet voice. Harry ignored her.

"I don't think he's interested Pritchard." Blaise said with glee.

"What do you know?" Heather snapped at him, finally turning her attention to someone other than Harry. "Harry is very deep. You just don't understand him. Not like I do."

"Right." Blaise responded sarcastically.

Harry caught Draco's eye over the book, finding the young Malfoy smirking at him. He shook his head, amusement in his eyes, before turning back to his book and shutting out all conversation again.

Finally, it was time to leave the train, as the Hogwarts Express pulled up at the station in Hogsmeade. Harry put his boom away and dragged his robes on over his muggle attire, then left the compartment with Malfoy and Blaise. Pansy and Heather called out for them to wait, but none of the boys did. They got off the train, hearing the familiar call of 'firs'-years, firs'-years over here' coming from the half-giant Care of Magical Creatures Professor, Hagrid. Hagrid spotted Harry and smiled at him.

"Hiya 'Arry." Hagrid boomed.

"Hey Hagrid." Harry said as he passed by the giant of a man, on his way to the carriages.

They found an empty carriage just as Pansy and Heather came panting up behind them obviously having run all the way to catch up to them.

"Why didn't you wait?" Pansy whined.

"Gee, I don't know, do you Harry?" Draco said sarcastically. Harry just smirked as he took a seat again at the far side.

Draco jumped up next and sat next to him, followed by Blaise who took the seat across from Harry, and Heather who sat next to Blaise. Pansy attempted to climb in and sit on Draco's lap again, but again he pushed off and she fell out of the carriage, which at that precise moment began to move, leaving her behind. They could hear her screaming at them until the station disappeared from view.

“You’re one mean git, you know that right?” Blaise asked, without even a hint of reprimand in his voice.

Draco just shrugged and looked forward, finding Heather glaring at him. He smirked at her and put his arm around Harrys shoulders. Harry cast him an odd glance, but then noticed Heather glaring at Draco and shook his head in amusement.

They quickly arrived at the Castle and jumped out of the carriage. A shrill voiced and red-faced Pansy Parkinson, who apparently had to sit with a bunch of second year Hufflepuffs, immediately confronted Draco. Harry led them into the Great Hall, Pansy shrill voice following him all the way. It was only when they reached the Great Hall that she shut up.

Harry took a seat at the end of the Slytherin table, scowling when Heather quickly dashed to sit next to him before Draco could sit down. Draco laughed and sat across from him instead.

They didn’t have to wait long for the first years to arrive and the Sorting Ceremony to begin. As predicated, the nervous first year girl that had delivered Slughorns invitation (a Melissa Fargo) was sorted into Hufflepuff. Draco smirked at Harry and held his hand out, into which Harry tipped ten Galleons. Blaise looked at them, confused.

“We’ll tell you later.” Draco stage whispered.

After that, Dumbledore stood and made his usual ridiculous speech and then the food arrived. Draco instantly began to stuff himself. Harry helped himself to some meat and potato pie and mushy peas and started to eat at his usual sedate pace, his eyes travelling around the Great Hall for anything out of the ordinary.

He didn’t find anything he wasn’t already expecting, but he did manage to spot a familiar bushy head of hair, belong to a Gryffindor girl sitting a few seats down from Ron Weasley, next to a chubby boy Harry didn’t know. At the precise moment Harry spotted her she looked up, catching his eyes accidentally. Her mouth opened a little, but she didn’t look away, at least not right way. But Harry didn’t take any of this in, all he did was stare in a rather out of character fashion, at the girl with the amazingly beautiful chocolate brown eyes.

"You okay Harry?" Draco asked, pointing a sausage speared fork at him.

Harry snapped out of his daze and met Draco's eyes. He cleared his throat. "Yeah." He looked up at the girl again, but she wasn't looking at him. She was, in fact, staring at her plate rather unnaturally. "Fine." Harry muttered distractedly.

"Come on then," Draco snapped impatiently. Harry snapped out of his daze again, finding that the Great Hall was emptying. He looked at Draco confusedly, but Draco just shook his head and nodded his head towards the door. "Come on."

"Right." Harry stood up and followed Draco out of the Hall, not even hearing as Heather rattled on incessantly to him about who knows what. He couldn't get those chocolate brown eyes out of his mind.

They reached the Slytherin common room and Draco said the password ('Serpensortia!') and then trailed up off to their sixth year dormitory as quickly as possible.

Three other boys were already in the room, checking through their things to see if anything was missing. The two biggest boys were Crabbe and Goyle. The last boy, a thin and regal looking wizard, was named Theodore Nott. They spared a few quick greetings before climbing into bed.

Draco and Harry choose beds beside each other and Blaise got the one across from Harrys. Blaise opened his trunk and started rifling through it as Harry sat on the end of his bed and did the same. Blaise looked up, catching Harrys eye.

"How come you didn't come to Slughorns meeting?" he asked.

"You got invited then." It wasn't a question.

"Yeah," Blaise said. "Big waste of time. So how come you didn't come?"

Harry gave him a look and Blaise laughed. "Right. Big waste of time."

“What was it all about?” Draco asked with some interest.

“Oh,” Blaise closed his trunk with a snap; satisfied it hadn’t been tampered with. “Nothing really. He just wanted to suck up to us. I’m surprised he didn’t invite you.”

“Yeah,” Draco murmured, catching Harry’s eye. They both knew why he didn’t get an invite.

“Anyway,” Blaise began again. “Complete waste of time. I wouldn’t bother to even think about it if I was you.”

Blaise stretched and started shucking off his clothes, before climbing into bed and closing his eyes. “Night guys.”

“Night.” Draco said casually, getting out his own clothes and climbing into bed.

Harry put the book he was reading on the train into his trunk and shut it as well, locking it with a quick charm. He climbed out of his clothes and folded them on top of his locked trunk before copying the rest of the sixth year boys and getting into bed. He flicked his wand at the bed curtains and they swung closed. Sticking his wand under his pillow, Harry closed his eyes and slowly started to fall asleep, thinking of chocolate coloured eyes.

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Five

The next morning Harry woke early, opened his trunk and removed his Invisibility Cloak, the Marauders Map given to him by Remus Lupin at the end of his third year, but most importantly, his Journal. The Journal was a record of anything he found suspicious, including the actions of his fellow house members. Deciding it wasn't wise to keep such incriminating evidence around, every year he took the Journal into Slytherins Chamber and hid it there, where only he could get it, along with any other valuable possession.

He dressed quickly and set off, leaving his curtains closed and sealing them shut with an Obstruction Charm. He whipped his Invisibility Cloak over his head and crept down the stairs and out of the Slytherin dungeons. He made his way down the corridor, heading farther into the dungeons, until finally he came to the statue of a scowling wizard wearing a cloak that revealed only his mouth. Harry brought out his wand and tapped the statue once near a small mark at the wizard's elbow, which upon closer inspection was a tiny snake. The statues mouth opened and another snake protruded from the wizard's mouth.

"Open." Harry hissed in Parsletongue.

Suddenly the statue gave away, jerking to the right, and then moving backwards to reveal an entryway. Harry walked in, following the dark statue as it moved backwards into the darkness, and finally moved to the right again and clicked into place. Harry walked further into the darkness and then the statue clicked again and retraced its steps, leaving Harry in total darkness.

"Phloxmenti." Harry whispered, raising his wand. Jets of flame set out, moving themselves along the wall to many lanterns that magically lit up with the Flame Charm. Harry pocketed his wand and looked around at the lit up room. It was just as he'd left it, not like he expected it to be different. He, aside from Draco, was the only one who knew of its existence, and was the only person who could enter besides Lord Voldemort himself.

The main room was quite large, but not nearly as large as the training room and library. It was mostly bare, containing a musty green sofa

and coffee table and the many doors leading to different parts of the Chamber. At the far back of the room was a small kitchen; it's cupboards stacked with a few plates and mugs, and a sink stuck into cold stone that made up the kitchens counter. Harry crossed to the nearest door and opened it, dropping his Cloak on the coffee table as he went.

He entered the bedroom, flicking his wand again and muttering another Flame Charm. The room lit up, revealing a large king sized bed with velvet sheets of green and silver pillows. A large mahogany wardrobe stood in the far corner and directly across from the bed was a huge table with legs shaped like snakes curling to the floor, stacking high with random books and pieces of paper. Harry clearly didn't like tidying up after himself. He walked over to the bed and deposited his possessions on the bed, before kneeling and pulling out a trunk hidden under the bed. He opened it with a flick of his wrist and grabbed the Journal, sticking it at the bottom of the trunk with the Marauders Map and a few other prized possessions.

Harry took to quickly tidying up, putting away the books stacked upon each other on the table and replacing them in either his trunk or the library. Then, not wanting to be caught up early, he whipped on the Invisibility Cloak and left the Chamber, heading back to his dorm. He arrived just as Draco was getting up, just managing to slip through before anyone else noticed beside his best friend. Draco saw the curtains around Harrys bed move and smirked to himself, before getting up and shouting.

"Harry! Get your lazy ass up you git."

Harry smiled to himself when he heard Draco, stuffed his Cloak in his trunk and then removed the Obstruction Charm and stepped out into view, rubbing his eyes as if he'd just awoken with the rest of them.

"It's about time," Draco said, dropping him a wink. Harry shook his head at the young Malfoys antics.

"You know me Draco."

Harry spread his arms side as if that explained everything and then followed Draco and Blaise out of the dormitory, through the common

room and out of the Slytherin dungeons. They made their way to the Great Hall, arriving just as the early morning bustle did. The three Slytherins took the same seats as the night before and were soon joined by Pansy and Heather, whom both had to sit next to Blaise because Draco and Harry had sat together this time.

“Good morning Draco!” Pansy practically squealed. Draco winced and batted a hand at her, telling her wordlessly to shut up. Heather smiled at Harry, but again he wasn’t paying attention, though this time not by choice, as he had just spotted the girl with the chocolate eyes enter the Great Hall. He watched her take a seat next to the same chubby boy as before and then start piling food on her plate.

“Harry?” Draco asked, nudging him roughly in the side with an elbow.

Harry snapped out of his trance and looked at Draco, and then past Draco to Professor Snape, who was hovering behind his best friend.

“Best not let your mind wander too much Potter,” Snape advised, handing him his timetable. “You never know when you may be attacked.”

Harry looked at him for a few moments, locking eyes, but he didn’t feel Snape try to pry into his mind. “Right.”

Snape nodded and moved along, leaving Harry behind. Draco gave Harry a look and he shook his head. Draco nodded and went back to eating his breakfast. Blaise looked suspiciously between the two, but didn’t comment.

Breakfast soon passed and they went on their way to the first lesson of term, Defence Against the Dark Arts. When they arrived Snape was already there, as was most of the class, but he didn’t say anything to them except wave them to their seats with a slight scowl.

Professor Snape immediately launched into a speech about the Dark Arts and Harry tuned him out. He found his gaze wandering the classroom, and again, he seemed to be drawn to a head of bushy brown hair. The girl was sitting across the room from him and a few rows forward, so all he could see was the back of her head, but he still felt himself transfixed. His attention soon returned to him when

Draco jabbed in the side with his wand, and Harry looked around, hearing Snapes speech draw to a close.

“Now, for your first lesson, we are going to concentrate on non-verbal spells, something I am sure you are all novices at. Can anyone tell me an advantage in using non-verbal spells?”

The mysterious girl with the chocolate eyes put her hand up, almost hesitantly. Snapes eyes roamed the room, passing over her at least three times before settling on her finally. Harry knew the answer, but he wanted to hear the girl speak, so he kept silent.

“Your adversary has no warning about what kind of magic you’re about to perform,” the girl said, and Harry thought her voice was the sweetest thing he had ever heard, soft and almost inaudible, making him have to listen hard to get every word, but with a hidden strength just waiting to burst free, “which gives you a split-second advantage.”

Professor Snape sneered at her. “Correct Miss Granger, but next time do try to speak up, contrary to popular belief, I am *not* a vampire.”

The girl, Granger, flushed and lowered her head to the desk again. Harry was surprised to feel anger spike in him at his Head of House. He had hardly ever been this angry with Professor Snape, and he was considerably used to Snapes sharp tongue directed at students – namely Gryffindors.

“However,” Snape continued, raising his voice slightly. “Not everyone can do this of course. It is a matter of concentration and the minds power, which some wizards lack. Now then, you will split into pairs and practise non-verbal spells. I do not want to hear a word out any mouth except my own, understood?” And he swept off to the side, waiting for students to pair up, before sweeping down and criticising them.

Harry and Draco got up and stepped away from the crowd of students bustling around to get to friends and partners. Draco raised his wand and Harry pulled his own out, meeting Draco’s eyes.

“I’ll attack,” Draco said. “You defend, okay?”

Harry nodded and waited. Draco had his eyes narrowed, focusing with his entire mind on casting the spell without speaking. Harry relaxed, letting his mind and eyes wander, and this time when his eyes landed on the girl (*Granger*, his mind corrected) he wasn't at all surprised. He wasn't worried about Draco casting a spell at him, he probably wouldn't be able to for a good while yet, and even if he did, Harry had enough senses locked on Draco to easily defend it if he did. Harry wasn't worried, after having practised non-verbal spells himself last year during Umbridge's rain of terror. He'd actually learnt more that year than any other year, surprisingly.

But Harry was surprised to discover, almost ten minutes into the lesson, that his mystery girl Granger had apparently figured it out, as she parried her partners (*the chubby boy again*, Harry noticed, *didn't she have any other friends?*) attempted Jinx with a quick, non-verbal Shield Charm. Harry smiled. She was obviously very smart.

Harry turned his attention back to Draco to find him almost purple in the face from concentration. Harry laughed and Draco glared at him.

"Relax Draco," Harry said. "You're trying too hard. Let your mind wander a little, then come back and try again. But don't stop breathing you idiot, that won't help."

Draco glared at him extra fiercely, but did as instructed.

"Don't concentrate too hard," Harry continued, "you have to just let it happen."

"Need I ask how you know all this Potter?" Draco grumbled.

"No," Harry replied with a smirk, "you needn't."

"You could have told me you were practising non-verbal spells you know." Draco argued. "I would have been interested."

"Sorry," Harry said, "but it was before I knew I could *really* trust you."

"You two are awfully chatty," Professor Snape appeared, swooping down on them like a large bat, "let's see how you do."

Harry nodded and looked at Draco, telling his best friend to remember what he told him, and then raised his wand. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed the rest of the class watching them eagerly.

Several seconds passed before suddenly a jet of red light erupted from Draco's wand and Harry deflected it with a quick *Protego*. Draco smirked and raised his arms sarcastically over his head. Some Slytherins laughed but most of the Gryffindors scowled.

"Well done Potter," Snape said, nodding his head at them both, "Malfoy. Twenty points to Slytherin."

The rest of the class passed quickly and they soon found themselves heading down to the familiar Potions dungeon, wondering what Professor Slughorns first class would be like. Harry, Draco and Blaise were the only ones to get enough O.W.L.s to qualify for the class, and as they arrived at the dungeons, it looked like it would be a very small class indeed. Harry, Draco and Blaise joined the group waiting outside the dungeon, which consisted of four Ravenclaws, one Hufflepuff and two Gryffindors – Ron Weasley and Harry's mystery girl Granger.

Slughorn soon arrived and jovially encouraged people into the dungeon and to get out their books and Potion kits. Harry, Draco and Blaise took a table at the back and Harry found himself sitting across from Granger, who was sitting alone. He cast a quick glance at her, but then turned his attention to Slughorn, who had come wobbling over to his table.

"Blaise," Slughorn greeted, "Harry - so good to see you. I'm sorry you couldn't come to see me on the train Harry, busy I suppose?"

"Whatever."

"Yes I rather thought so." Slughorn said, then gave them a big smile and waddled off again, ignoring the fact that Harry hadn't really answered his question. He stopped at the front and puffed out his rather large chest. "Now then, I've prepared some potions for you to take a look at. Can anyone tell me what this one is?" And he pointed to the one nearest to Harry.

Harry noticed it was Grangers hand that rose into the air again and Slughorn nodded to her.

"It's Veritaserum sir," Granger answered, "and it forces the user to tell the truth."

"Quite correct," Slughorn said, "and this one?"

Granger's hand rose once again, but before Slughorn could even point at her Harry spoke: "Polyjuice Potion."

Slughorn turned a beaming smile to Harry and laughed pleasantly. "Very good."

Harry cast his eyes to Granger again to find her regarding him with a puzzled look. He smirked at her and she dropped her eyes to the desk, blushing madly.

"And this one?" Slughorn pointed to the second to last potion. Nobody spoke.

Harry watched as Granger lifted her head and glanced at him. He smiled encouragingly and nodded his head. She blushed again but raised her hand. Slughorn pointed at her with a bemused smile.

"It's Amortentia," she responded, "the most powerful love potion in the world. Recognised by it's distinctive mother-of-pearl sheen and the steam rising in characteristic spirals. It's supposed to smell different to each of us, according to what attracts us."

Granger looked at Harry again and he could swear her eyes held challenge, at least for a moment, before they reverted to looking shy again, and she cast her eyes down. Harry smirked. He definitely liked this girl.

"Excellent indeed!" Slughorn grinned. "May I ask your name miss?"

"H-Hermione Granger." She replied.

Hermione, Harry thought, smiling.

Slughorn continued to press her for information on her family, until she told him she was a Muggle-born. He seemed quite surprised.

“Sir,” the Hufflepuff boy had put his hand up, apparently getting bored of the off topic chatter, “What’s in this one?” He pointed to the last Cauldron.

“Oho!” Slughorn tucked his thumbs into the waistband of his trouser and puffed out his belly once more. “I think Miss Granger here knows, but why don’t we let someone else answer this one.”

Harry noticed with some amusement that Hermione looked slightly put out by Slughorn’s comment. He smiled and turned his attention back to Slughorn.

“Felix Felicis,” Harry said, “basically, liquid luck.”

Slughorn slapped his large hands and beamed at both Harry and Hermione. “I think I should award twenty points to both Gryffindor and Slytherin, don’t you?” It wasn’t clear whom he was asking, so everyone stayed silent. He then went on to give them more information about Felix Felicis and then told them they had to create the potion themselves, and the person who made the best effort would get a tiny vial of the luck potion.

Harry was determined to win it, so he quickly set out to do the best job he could at such late notice. Every now and then he looked around the room to see how everyone else was doing. The only one close to him was Hermione, whose potion looked quite like his own. At the end of the lesson Slughorn called for them to stop and Harry stepped back from his potion.

Harry heard Draco snigger with some amusement at the tarlike substance in Ron Weasley’s Cauldron, but Harry wasn’t interested. He knew it would be either himself or Hermione and he could wait to find out whom.

When Slughorn had finished assessing all the potions, he raised his arms over his head and declared. “It was a very close call, between two brilliant attempts, but I have to say that the winner is... Miss Hermione Granger!”

Hermione smiled bashfully as Slughorn handed her the small vile of Felix Felicis. Harry caught her eye and gave her a smile as well, and she quickly turned crimson and turned away. Harry just chuckled.

“What’s so funny?” Draco asked, puzzled.

“Nothing.”

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Six

The next day found Harry heading to Charms with Draco, followed way too closely by Pansy and Heather, their collective stalkers. Before Harry and Draco could reach the classroom, however, they were intercepted by a younger Slytherin boy that Harry thought was called Harper, but he couldn't be sure. Harper stopped before him and handed out a small slip of parchment. Harry took it.

"When are you holding Quidditch try-outs?" Harper asked, whilst Harry started reading. Harry pointed half-heartedly at Draco, who opened his robes to reveal the shiny Slytherin Captain badge. "Oh, I thought you'd get it Potter."

"He did," Draco drawled, "but the dope sent the badge back."

"So you got it instead," Harper realised.

"Obviously," Draco retorted sarcastically. "As for try-outs, I'm holding them this weekend."

"Okay," Harper replied, then took off at a run, "later."

"Like hell I'd ever let that guy on the team," Draco snorted. "Idiot."

"Meeting with Dumbledore Saturday night," Harry replied, pocketing the piece of parchment.

"What'd you think he's going to teach you?" Draco asked, as they continued their walk to Charms.

"No idea," Harry replied, looking thoughtful.

(--)

The rest of the day passed in a blur, Harry too caught up in thinking about Dumbledores special lessons to even pay attention to his regular ones, even going so far as to fall asleep during Arithmancy, but could you blame him?

When seven o'clock rolled around he found himself sitting in Slytherins Chamber, attempting to do the extra Arithmancy homework Professor Vector had set him when she caught him sleeping. He wasn't doing very well. Deciding he didn't have the right book, he got up and grabbed his cloak, stuffed the rest of his books into his bag and left the hidden chamber, heading up to the Hogwarts Library.

He arrived and began to search for the correct book towards the back of the Library, out of everyone's way. Most of the student body stuck around the entrance to the Library, as if afraid they'd get lost in the stacks and never find their way out, choosing to sit at the front tables. But Harry liked it that way; it just made the back of the Library quieter, which was perfectly fine by him.

He started to look through the rows of books on Arithmancy, finding everything but the one book he wanted, which was typical. He found *Arithmancy for Squibs*, *Arithmancy and Why We Need It*, and even *New Theory of Numerology*, which Harry knew was a complete waste of time, he'd read it.

Sighing, he turned around and leant against the stacks, and in doing so spotted the ever-familiar head of Hermione Granger. Harry didn't stop to think how odd it was that now that he'd really seen her, he kept seeing her everywhere, when they'd been going to the same school for five years and he hasn't even noticed her once.

He walked around the stacks and leant against the end of the last one, watching as she worked at a really long piece of parchment, scribbling away with quill, her back to him and her bushy hair pulled back in a ponytail. She was hunched over the table, her nose almost touching the parchment, and Harry found himself grinning at the sight.

After having his fill of watching her work, he walked around, silently, his feet not even making a sound, pulled out a chair and sat down right across from her. She still hadn't noticed him. He had way too much practise at not being seen; even he had to admit that.

She continued to scrawl away at the parchment, not even looking up, just continually writing, only stopping to re-ink her quill. Didn't she need to check her facts? Watching her work, Harry decided, apparently not. She really was the smartest witch in the year,

probably the school. She finally stopped, sighed, and sat up straight, her eyes widening at the sight of Harry sitting in front of her. He quill fell from her hand and landed on the parchment.

"You should really pay more attention," Harry advised, "I know its Hogwarts, but it's still not entirely safe."

Hermione ran a hand over her hair and looked around, as if looking for someone to come and save her, and Harry frowned.

"Hey," he said, getting her attention again. "Why so jumpy?"

"Not Jumpy." Hermione said shyly. "Did you... want something?"

Harry shrugged. "Figured we could talk."

"Why?"

Harry laughed softly and unknowingly sent shivers up and down Hermiones spine. "Okay," he leant forward, resting his elbows on the table, "maybe because I find you interesting."

"Interesting?"

"You ever going to form a complete sentence?" Harry asked with good humour.

"I just don't understand why you're talking to me, that's all." Hermione snapped, her hidden passion getting the best of her, but quickly dying down, leaving her blushing and staring at the table. "Sorry." She mumbled.

"It's okay," Harry replied. "I'm talking to you because, like I said before, I find you interesting. Is that so hard for you to believe?"

"I-I...I don't know," Hermione mumbled, and he could tell she was feeling stupid. "I guess."

"Then how's this," Harry put his bag on the table and pulled out his books, notes and quill, "I sit here. You sit there. We study. If you want to talk, you talk, okay?"

Hermione nodded.

“Okay.” Harry dropped his bag to the floor and turned his attention to his parchment.

Hermione watched him for a short time, and then went back to her own work, every now and again glancing up and catching Harry watching her with a small smile on his face. After nearly an hour of studying, she looked up and caught his eye again, her cheeks turned pink. Harry couldn’t help but find it adorable. He was surprised when she spoke.

“Aren’t you going to do your homework?” she asked softly.

Harry glanced down at the parchment he had hardly touched and then back up at Hermione. He shrugged.

“I’m stuck.”

“Stuck?” she asked, confusion marring her features, creating a line between her eyebrows that made her look even more beautiful. Harry smiled at her again. He probably looked like a spaz, but he couldn’t help it. She just made him want to smile.

“I don’t have the right book,” Harry told her, “and before I could find it, I found you, and you’re infinitely more interesting than a dumb Arithmancy book.”

“Arithmancy?” Hermione asked, overlooking the compliment. “It’s my favourite subject. I could... help you...” She trailed off and Harry knew she was feeling stupid again.

“I’d like that.” he replied quickly, and smiled at her when she looked at him, glad that she smiled back this time, albeit a little shyly.

“When do you need to hand your homework in?” she asked, quickly forgetting about her nervousness around Harry Potter.

“I’ve got until next week,” Harry replied, “so it’s no rush.”

“Oh,” Hermione looked thoughtful, “what book is it you need? I might have it.”

“Mmm...” Harry tried to remember the title. “I think it was called *Numerology and the Number Twelve*. Definitely something to do with twelve.”

Harry was glad to see Hermione grinning at him bashfully, her white teeth clearly showing, and her cheeks forming the cutest little dimples. “I have it.” She said.

“Great,” Harry announced, “You’re a life saver Hermione.”

Hermione turned scarlet quickly and ducked her head again.

“I can call you Hermione, can’t I?” Harry asked.

Hermione nodded her lowered head, then frowned when Harry’s hand appeared in front of her face, and she looked up at him curiously.

“And you can call me Harry.” Harry told her, giving her an encouraging grin. She smiled back and shook his head. Harry enjoyed the feel of her small soft hand in his rough one and didn’t want to let go, but that probably would have scared her off, so he let go, albeit reluctantly. Sitting back in his chair, he watched her as she riffled through her bag and brought out the book he needed.

“Here.” She handed it to him and Harry took it, making sure to brush his fingers with hers.

“Thanks a lot,” Harry opened the book and began looking through, trying to find the passage he remembered. After looked for over ten minutes, he gazed over the top of the book and saw Hermione working diligently again. He set the book down but kept his finger lodged between the pages so he wouldn’t lose his place. “Is Arithmancy really your favourite subject?”

Hermione looked up, caught his eyes and nodded, still blushing a little. “You don’t like it?” she asked after a short while of just looking at him.

"Nope," Harry replied, "It's too finicky. Don't get me wrong, I understand it, but it's really not where my interest lies."

"Oh," Hermione nodded in understanding, "then...where does it?"

"My interest?" *How about staying alive?* He thought sarcastically, but decided not to say that. "Let's just say it's not on number problems and numbers in relation to magic."

"Okay," She cast her eyes down again and Harry sighed.

"I'm not upset you know," he told her, "you don't have to cower like that."

"I'm not cowering," Hermione mumbled.

"Are too."

"Am not."

"Are too."

"Am not."

"Are too."

"Am...not." Hermione couldn't help herself, she giggled. Harry grinned at her and she covered her red face with her hands, still giggling.

"See," Harry said, "I'm not so bad am I?"

"...No." Hermione admitted, after getting control of herself.

Silence fell again, as the two went back to working comfortably, the only sound being the scratching quills. Finally, Hermione closed her books and rolled up her parchments, beginning to stick them in her bag.

"Going so soon?" Harry asked, giving Hermione his best kicked puppy look.

Hermione hid a smile behind hand and nodded her head. "Sorry, but I said I'd help my friend with some stuff."

"It's okay," Harry said, standing up and reaching across the table to grab her bag. She reached for it and he pulled back, just out of reach. "Promise to meet me here tomorrow night at seven?"

Hermione gave him a long, searching look, before smiling bashfully again and nodding her head. "Okay."

He gave her the bag and made to give her the book she had leant him, but she shook her head. "Its okay, you can borrow it." Hermione murmured.

"Thanks," Harry said, putting the book down again. "So, see you tomorrow?"

Hermione made a noise in agreement and turned to walk away.

"Bye Hermione."

She stopped, turned her head and gave him another small smile. "Bye...Harry." And she turned and left.

Harry sat down, smiling, pleased with himself. He quickly finished off his homework, stuffed Hermiones book gently in his bag and left the Library, looking forward to seven tomorrow.

(--)

Hermione practically ran all the way up to Gryffindor Tower, blurting out the password to the Fat Lady and running through the entryway, only stopping when she reached the common room, not wanting to draw attention to herself. She just couldn't believe she'd studied with Harry Potter.

She made her way up the stairs to her dormitory, feeling like she could faint at any moment, but at the same time kicking herself for being such a girly girl, falling all over herself like some lovesick puppy. He's just a boy. Nothing special. Except Harry was special.

She made her way to her bed, glad that Parvati and Lavender weren't around, closed the curtains around her bed and sat down with a sigh. Hermione was confused. She had been dying to meet *the* Harry Potter ever since she read about him before her first year, but when she did meet him, it didn't go exactly like she planned. He blatantly ignored her. Well, he blatantly ignored most people, to be honest. But tonight, he had seemed determined to get to know her? Why? What had changed? Was it some sort of prank he and his Slytherin friends were playing on her?

Hermione felt tears come to her eyes at the thought, but quickly banished them, shaking her head and wiping at her teary eyes. It was just stupid and pointless to cry. She had to figure out what was going on. Why was the most mysterious boy at Hogwarts suddenly interested in plain old Muggle-born Hermione Granger? Why, when he didn't show an interest in anyone else?

Hermione heard sounds coming from downstairs and then Lavender's voice came ringing through the door. Hermione quickly crawled under her covers and curled up into a ball. Lavender made a whole lot of racket, obviously looking for something, and then Hermione heard Parvati's voice. They started talking in hushed tones that grew dimmer and dimmer until the door closed again with a snap. Hermione sighed. She wished she had friends who would understand, but all she had was Neville.

But Hermione didn't have female friends; she only had herself, so she shook her head again and started to think, trying to figure out what to do next. The facts were simple, Harry apparently liked her, but whether it was real or not, she didn't know. She clearly had a crush on him, how else could she explain her over the top emotions and the fact that she couldn't even look at him without turning red.

So did she show up tomorrow, like she had promised? Or did she stay away and hope that he forgot about her? Did she really want him to forget? She didn't think so. She had dreamt and fantasised about Harry for a long time.

But this isn't a fantasy Hermione, a knowledgeable voice in the back of her head told her. This is real life and you could get hurt.

A lot of people thought that Harry was dangerous. She had heard Ron Weasley tell his friends Dean and Seamus that Harry was a Dark Wizard, he was sure of it. Did she believe him? Surprisingly, she didn't. She couldn't understand why, but she wanted to trust Harry.

Why not? I have nothing else going for me, Hermione thought, *and so if it just turns out to be a cruel joke, who cares?* Hermione smiled to herself, burying her head into her pillow. She was going to take a chance. She was going to trust the warm, kindhearted boy she had talked to today. She was going to trust Harry Potter.

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Seven

Harry met Hermione the following two nights at the same time, seven o'clock, and spent at least two hours with her each day, just enjoying her company and studying. She seemed to grow more confident in herself and comfortable around him as time went on, talking even more than he expected.

Harry had waited almost half an hour the first night, sitting alone at the back of the Library, almost sure that she wasn't going to show up. But she did. He had then noticed that she walked with a slight limp and had wondered why. Not wanting to be too forward, he didn't ask, but filed it away as something he most definitely wanted to know.

The second day was the most interesting, where they spent pretty much the entire time talking to each other, hardly getting any work done. Harry remembered the adorable way Hermione seemed to panic when she realised she had hardly done any of her work. Harry had just smiled at her, making her flush.

Harry had spent a lot of time in Slytherins Chamber thinking about Hermione and why he was so interested in her, when no other girl could hold his interest for more than a few seconds, if that. But there was no need to think about it now. Harry was sure, he was falling for the girl, and he seemed to have no control over the matter. Not that he really cared. If lack of control was what he had to give up to be with Hermione, then so be it. Meet Harry - Fates bitch.

Friday soon came and Harry found himself yet again waiting for Hermione at the back of the Hogwarts Library, surrounded by books and parchment, marvelling at how fast they'd become study friends. Harry groaned to himself. That was definitely not what he was aiming for and he decided that he better make that clear tonight. He'd been beating around the bush for too long. Tonight he'd ask Hermione to go on a date with him.

She arrived not long after Harry had made up his mind, smiling at him in greeting and sitting down next to him, brushing a lock of her bushy hair behind her ear as she did so. Harry turned in his chair to better look at her, catching her eye, and smiling in return.

"Hi," she said, her cheeks reddening slightly.

"Hey," Harry replied, "how'd that charms homework go? Top marks again?"

Hermione giggled and nodded. "Mmm."

"No surprise there."

"You helped," Hermione said, "I probably wouldn't have done that well if you hadn't told me about that special charm."

"You would have found it eventually," Harry defended, "you aren't the smartest witch in our year for nothing you know. Your so smart you should be in Ravenclaw."

"I don't know why I'm not," Hermione said.

"Because your bravery and courage far out ways even your intelligence," Harry told her, "and that's no easy feat."

Hermione turned scarlet at his compliment and dropped her head, hiding behind her hair.

"I'm not..." she murmured, trailing off.

"Yes you are," Harry said with conviction, "I've seen it. Your strength is so hidden than even you don't know its their, but it is. You just need more confidence."

Harry reached out and moved her hair aside, exposing her blushing and down turned face to his eyes. Hermione looked up at him with an indrawn breath, her mouth slightly apart.

"I don't know why you think so little of yourself," Harry continued, "but I swear I'm going to make you see how special you are." Harry smiled ruefully. "I don't know how I didn't notice you before this year. I guess I need to pay more attention to what's going on around me."

Hermione had tears in her eyes now, but was smiling happily at Harry.

“Hermione?” Harry said, catching her eyes. She nodded, imploring him to go on. “I’m sick of studying. Do you want to go for a walk? Get some fresh air?”

“Yes,” Hermione replied, “that sounds nice.”

“Come on then.”

Harry offered her his hand and Hermione took it. He helped her to her feet, pack her bag, along with his, and then they set off, leaving the quiet Library (everyone else was at the huge feast held on Fridays) and setting off towards the lake. Half way there, Harry reached out and took Hermione hand again. She gave a soft gasp of surprise, but made no more to pull free.

The Lake shone before them, lit up brilliantly by the moonlight shining periodically through the cloudy sky. They stopped to watch the tentacles of the giant squid rise every now and then from the lake, sending ripples over the silvery looking water.

“It’s so beautiful,” Hermione breathed.

“It is.” Harry wasn’t talking about the lake.

“I’ve never seen the lake like this before,” Hermione admitted. “I normally don’t go walking around the grounds...or the castle, either, for that matter. I guess you think I’m boring, but I tend to just stay in my common room or the Library.”

“I don’t think you’re boring,” Harry argued, “just different. That’s not bad either. I like different. Besides, now I get the pleasure of showing you each and every nook and cranny in Hogwarts. You’re going to love it.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, “I like exploring. I spent a lot of time doing that over the years. I’m pretty sure I’ve seen everything Hogwarts has to offer.”

"I can't wait." Hermione whispered, blushing and glancing at their still joined hands.

Harry gave hers a squeeze and said: "Me either. Come on, let's sit down."

Harry pulled her over towards a large tree that loomed out over the huge lake. Harry let go of her hand, took his cloak off and smoothed it out on the floor before the tree, sitting down and patting by his side. Hermione joined him and they leant back against the bark. Hermione looked up at the cloudy sky through the many branches, the moonlight cast over her face, lighting her up and making her even more beautiful. Harry followed her gaze, watching the moon peak out between clouds.

"I love it like this," Harry told her, "it's my favourite time of the day."

"I can see why," Hermione replied with awe, "it's so beautiful, but a little scary at the same time."

"Don't worry," Harry said, "the shadows like me, I won't let them hurt you." Hermione giggled and Harry grinned at her.

A comfortable silence fell on the two teenagers as they watched the sky above them, only to be broken when Harry spoke up.

"Hermione, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure." Hermione looked away from the sky, studying Harry. "What is it?"

"It's personal," Harry said, "so if you don't want to answer I'll understand. I'm just wondering - why do you have that limp?"

"Oh," Hermione looked down, studying her hands in her lap, before continuing in a whisper, "remember the Troll? In our first year?"

Harry nodded.

"I was in the girls bathroom, because I was...upset. The Troll came in and started smashing the place up with its club, I tried to get away

but..." She let out a ragged breath. "When Professor McGonagall and the other teachers found me I was unconscious. The Troll had crushed my leg and my arm and gave me a concussion. They had to re-grow my bones in my arm and leg with Skele-grow, but it was complicated, because technically I still had my bones. When it was done I couldn't walk without limping and my arm won't completely straighten." She held out her arm to show him, but he couldn't tell with her wearing the jumper, so she just let it drop.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, "that sounds horrible."

"It was," Hermione agreed, "I didn't talk to anyone but Neville and my Professor, but even then I hardly said anything. My parents wanted to pull me out of school but I wouldn't let them. I still wanted to be a witch."

Harry didn't know what to say, she he just kept his mouth closed. Hermione took another ragged breath and then smiled at him. "But I'm okay now. I don't mind. Things like that just happen in life...I don't really think about it much."

"Yeah," Harry said, "I can understand why."

"Besides," Hermione began, "I think my limp gives me character, don't you?"

Harry couldn't but smile back when she gave him a rueful, but slightly sad smile. He knew she wasn't completely serious, but she was trying. He could understand the need for her to make it seem less serious. Hermione looked up at the sky again, frowning.

"It's getting late," she said, "I better go."

"Okay," Harry stood up and offered her his hand; "I'll walk you back to Gryffindor tower."

"How do you know where it is?" Hermione asked him, her frown deepening.

"I told you," Harry replied, "I know everything about Hogwarts." He grinned at her and she giggled.

“Okay.” Hermione offered him her hand and he took it, before starting back towards Hogwarts.

It didn’t take them long to reach the seventh floor, but before Hermione could turn the corner to the corridor on which the Fat Lady was placed strategically over the entrance to Gryffindor tower, Harry stopped. She turned to regard him curiously.

“I better not reveal that I know where your common room is to the Fat Lady,” he said, “I’m sure she wouldn’t like that.”

Hermione smiled, nodding in understanding. Harry reached up and brushed a bit of hair from her cheek, then leant down and placed a quick kiss there. Hermione blushed scarlet, but Harry saw her grinning as well.

“Goodnight Hermione.”

“Goodnight Harry.”

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Eight

The first week of Hogwarts had come to a close, leaving the students tired and relieved, glad of the weekend respite. Students everywhere lounged the Saturday away, talking and catching up with friends, some playing a pick-up game of Quidditch, other, more dedicated students, doing their homework. But whoever they were, they were all glad of the two days of rest, and so the day passed.

Draco was sitting in the Slytherin common room, which was slowly emptying as night crept upon them and engulfed the castle in its darkness. He was currently waiting for the Harry to get back from his lesson with Dumbledore, whilst playing a quick game of wizard's chess with Blaise. Much to his annoyance, he was losing.

"Come on Draco," Blaise taunted, "I thought you'd be a bigger challenge than this."

"Shut up Zabini," Draco shot back, frowning at his losing chess pieces, which scowled back up at him, "I can't concentrate with your constant nattering."

"Like it'd make a difference." Blaise scoffed, smirking.

"It'd make all the difference in the world," Draco murmured, trying to think of a way to outmanoeuvre his opponent.

"Care to make a wager on that?" Blaise asked.

Draco looked up. "Terms?"

"I shut up," Blaise said, "we play to the finish and whoever loses has to...hmm, let's think...I know...whoever loses has to seduce a Gryffindor of the others choosing."

"No way." Draco said.

"Chicken." Blaise accused.

"I'm no chicken," Draco stated, "but there's no way I'm going to try and seduce a Gryffindor."

“That won’t be a problem thought, will it? You said you could definitely beat me if I stopped talking. So put your dignity where your mouth is, you chicken.”

“Fine!” Draco said, holding out his hand. Blaise shook it. “You’re going down Zabini, and I mean all of you, reputation first.”

Blaise just smirked. “We’ll see Malfoy.”

Draco went back to frowning at his chess pieces, before finding a move to his liking, and taking it. He looked up at Blaise, who grinned.

“Nice move,” Blaise said, “but it’s not going to save you.”

Blaise made his own move, putting Draco in check. Draco wasn’t worried; it was all a part of his plan. He quickly followed up with his planned move and got out of check. Only one more move to go and Blaise would be done for. Blaise laughed out loud, making Draco pause in his reflection of imminent victory.

“I knew it,” Blaise said, “you’re so predictable Malfoy.”

Blaise made another move, Draco blinked, checked again. No, it couldn’t be. Draco ran his eyes all over the board and then groaned. It was over. Blaise’s queen took Draco’s king and soon Draco’s army of chess pieces was crushed. Draco put his head in his hands, unable to believe that he lost, and hating the sound of Blaise mocking laughter.

“This is going to be good.” Blaise gloated.

“Shut up Zabini.” Draco mumbled through his hands.

“Don’t you wanna know who you have to seduce?” Blaise asked, his mocking voice grating on Draco’s nerves.

“Not really...”

Blaise laughed. “Well I think I’ll tell you anyway. You see young Malfoy, you, as a result of your over inflated ego, are going to have to seduce one Ginny Weasley, of the dork infested Gryffindors.” And he

burst out laughing again, causing the few remaining Slytherins in the common room to give him puzzled looks.

Draco just growled in his defeat.

(--)

Hogwarts was silent, the halls echoing every one of Harry's footsteps as he made his way back to the Slytherin common room. He couldn't take his mind off what he had seen in Dumbledores Pensieve, through Bob Ogden's memory. The image of the Gaunt family was burned in his mind and he shuddering, just thinking he was connected to those...people, however loosely. The descendants of Salazar Slytherin had fallen to nothing more than rats, dirty and angry at the world.

He felt sorry for Merope Gaunt, knowing what it was like to be regarded as useless, as nothing more than a burden. Thankfully, he had never known such treatment as she had, but all the same. Watching Marvolo Gaunt abuse his daughter, and her infatuation with the Muggle Ton Riddle, he couldn't help but think if things had been different, if maybe Merope had not been born, then the world would have been better.

Without Merope, Voldemort wouldn't exist. Just knowing that such a small thing as a young girl's futile infatuation had given rise to the darkest wizard the world had seen in a long time, Harry learned to beware the little things.

When Harry arrived back at the Slytherin common room, he found Draco sitting alone on one of the room's chairs, staring into the fire burning in the stone hollow, lost in thought. He dropped into a chair beside Draco and the young Malfoy jumped, turning startled eyes to Harry. Harry held up a hand when Draco opened his mouth to speak.

"I know," Harry said, "Bell, right?"

Draco smirked, nodding. "I was waiting for you."

"Figured." Harry replied.

"How did the lesson go?" Draco asked. "What did Dumbledore teach you?"

"He didn't really teach me anything," Harry said, trailing off.

Draco gave him a look, telling him to continue.

"Well," Harry ran a hand through his hair and leant back in the chair, propping his feet up on another chair across from him, "He showed me a memory in his Pensieve."

"A memory of what?"

"Of the descendants of Salazar Slytherin," Harry said, "the Gaunts."

"Descendants?" Draco looked shocked. "How does he know they're descendants of Slytherin?"

"I didn't ask," Harry said, "but I'm sure they are. I saw Voldemorts mother in the memory, and his grandfather Marvolo, and even his Muggle father."

"So why did Dumbledore show you this?" Draco asked, looking very curious.

"I have no idea," Harry admitted, "but I guess it's important. He wouldn't waste my time, would he? Anyway, Dumbledore said that Merope, Voldemorts mother, used a love potion on Tom Riddle and became pregnant. Dumbledore thinks that after a time Merope was convinced that even without the love potion Riddle would love her, but when she stopped giving him the potion he left and never saw her again. She died shortly after that I think, after giving birth to Voldemort, of course."

"That's kinda sad huh?" Draco said, frowning. "The fact she had to use a love potion to get what she wanted. I don't really understand that, I suppose. It wasn't real, so why bother? Women, I'll never understand them."

Harry chuckled. "I guess," Harry said, "but she was in love Draco. Love does strange things to people."

"I guess..." Draco didn't sound convinced.

"I saw this ring in the Pensieve as well," Harry continued, "Marvolo was wearing it. But after we left the memory I saw it in Dumbledores office as well. I asked him if it had something to do with what he was trying to show me. He said that all would be revealed to me in the end. I'm getting rather tired of his secrets. I wish he'd just tell me out straight."

"I don't blame you," Draco agreed.

"But I guess I'll just be patient," Harry said, "he'll tell me when he's ready. Or when I get annoyed to the point I demand the truth, either way."

Draco laughed. "If you really want to know so much why don't you just demand he tell you then?"

"No," Harry said, "he'll tell me when he's ready. Let him have his secrets for now, I have my own. I'd just be being a hypocrite if I demanded answers."

"If you say so." Draco dismissed. "So, any idea what significance the ring has?"

"It was Slytherins, that's all I know. Maybe it's worth something to Voldemort, I don't know. Anything I could come up with would just be a guess. Best to wait for more information right now."

"Yeah," Draco agreed. "Anyway, if that's all, I'm going to get some sleep. You coming?"

"No," Harry said, "I'm not tired yet. I'll see you tomorrow Draco."

"Okay," Draco yawned, "night Harry."

"Night."

(--)

Lessons started up again on Monday and Harry and Hermione continued to meet every night in the Library. Things were going well for the blossoming couple. Hermione was more open than ever, looking Harry in the eye a whole lot more than he was used to, which only made him smile. She still blushed awfully for most of the date, but Harry didn't mind, he still thought it was adorable.

Wednesday night was a whole different story though, as Hermione seemed to regress into herself again, hardly looking at Harry, but frowning down at her parchment. Harry figured something was wrong, and determined to not let things go down hill, he reached out to her. Gently touching her arm and getting her attention, he asked:

"Hermione, is something wrong?"

"What?" She didn't meet his eyes. "No, of course not. Why would something be wrong? Everything is fine. Totally fine."

"Then why are you babbling?" Harry asked, and he couldn't help but smile, even though he was worried. Babbling Hermione was even more adorable than blushing Hermione.

"I'm not babbling." She argued.

"You were babbling." Harry argued back. "Come on, I thought we were getting close."

"I did too." Hermione whispered, and she still wouldn't meet his eyes.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, frowning in confusion.

"Well," Hermione looked up, finally meeting his eyes, as if getting a sudden confidence boost, "you come up to me and start talking to me, which is really quite shocking, because you're Harry Potter, the most mysterious boy in Hogwarts, talking to me, plain old Hermione Granger." Harry opened his mouth to start speaking, but Hermione started again before he could even get out a syllable. "So I think, okay, maybe you like me. So I decide to give you a chance, and things start to go really well. You take me on a really sweet date, walking around the lake, and even kiss me on the cheek after walking

me back to my common room. But it's been almost two weeks now and it's like...are you ashamed of me?"

Harry could only gape at her, stunned by the huge speech she had just spurted out in less than ten seconds. Hermione looked at him pointedly.

"Harry?" she asked. "Harry? Are you?"

"What?" Harry finally gasped.

"Are you ashamed of me?" Hermione repeated.

"What...makes you think that?" Harry was about to say 'what?' again, but quickly amended it.

"Why won't you talk to me in public?" she asked. "I've seen you eating in the Great Hall a few times, and I've tried to get your attention, but you just ignore me. People are starting to look at me funny. I want to be able to hold your hand and...just...be seen with you."

"Do you really want that Hermione?" Harry asked, finally getting control of his brain. "Do you want to be the headline in newspapers, gossiped about and victimized by all the other girls? I'm not trying to be arrogant, even though it may sound that way, but I know what goes on around me, even if it doesn't look like it. I'm not stupid. I know most girls have a crush on me. They'd hate you for being with me. I just don't think it's a good idea."

"Oh..." Hermione looked like she was about to cry.

Harry reached out, grasping her chin gently in his hand, turning her face towards his, and looking her in the eye.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I wish I could be with you in public too. Smile at you, touch you, hold your hand, walk you to your lesson...kiss you. I want all that just like you do. I'm so sorry I can't give you that. But I don't want to lose you either. So if you're willing to keep it a secret, I'll be ecstatic, but if you don't want that, if you can't, I'll understand. I'll be crushed, but I'll understand."

Harry let go, but didn't lose eye contact with her. Hermione sniffed and looked away. When she met his eyes again, Harry saw her determination in her eyes.

"I understand Harry," Hermione said, "and for now, I can keep it a secret. I don't want to not be with you either. The time I spend with you is the happiest I've ever been in my entire life. So, I understand, and can keep it a secret for now. But someday, promise me we can be together."

"I promise Hermione," Harry said, smiling.

"Thank you."

"No," Harry said, "thank you."

They spent the rest of the evening in silence, just enjoying each other's company.

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Nine

The Hogwarts Quidditch pitch was flooded with red and gold as the Gryffindor house held Quidditch try-outs. The field had amassed quite a few more players than usual this year; all wanting to get on the team after last year saw the departure of four players. The only ones left where the newly instated Gryffindor Quidditch Captain Ron Weasley, team veteran Katie Bell, and Ron's little sister, the chaser Ginny Weasley.

Draco Malfoy watched the proceedings from the stands, sitting at the far back so as not to be noticed. He watched as Ron directed traffic, trying to sort the collective students into some sort of order. He seemed to be doing pretty well with it, not that Draco would ever admit that. Soon, they had a neat collection of students, waiting in specific groups depending on what position on the team they wanted to try out for.

Draco wasn't paying much attention to that though, he was mainly focusing on the reason he was at the pitch in the first place, his target - Ginny Weasley. Draco had to admit, she wasn't all that bad looking, for a Gryffindor. She had flowing red hair, a pretty enough face, and all the right curves. At least as far as he could tell through her Quidditch uniform. Draco sent a quick thank you to whatever deity was watching out for him. At least she wasn't ugly.

Draco admired her Quidditch skill from afar, watching as she ran rings around the potential keepers, making them all look like complete novices, even though some weren't half bad. *She's almost as good a flyer as Harry*, Draco thought.

When all was said and done, and the Gryffindor team was whole once more, Ginny started making her way back towards the castle, still wearing her red and gold uniform. Draco stood up and followed her, taking a quick short cut Harry had shown him so that he could reach the castle before her.

Ginny was just entering the castle when Draco appeared, grabbing her from behind and putting his hand over her mouth to muffle her scream, before quickly dashing into an old broom closet. He let go of her, pushing her up against the wall, leaning in closer. She wasn't

screaming anymore, but she was glaring at him with fiery passion. Draco found her brown eyes startling, and was momentarily taken aback.

"Hello Weasley," Draco purred, "fancy seeing you here. In a broom closet and all."

"What do you want Malfoy?" Ginny hissed, "And get of me!" She tried to shrug him off, but he managed to keep hold of her.

"Now Now Weasley," Draco said, "that's not very nice."

"What do you know about nice?" Ginny scowled at him.

"I know a bit more than you'd imagine, I assure you." Draco said, leaning in closer to whisper in her ear. "I can be *very* nice." The way he stressed the word 'very' made it clear exactly what he was talking about, and when Draco pulled back, he was satisfied to see her blushing a little.

"Yeah," Ginny said sarcastically, casting her eyes to the door, "when your not terrorizing people, I'm sure you can be very nice."

"Why don't I show you?" Draco said, leaning in.

Ginny finally had enough and roughly shoved him away, finally getting free. Draco saw her chest was heaving and her face was flushed. Her red hair had fallen across her face, and she brushed it angrily out of the way,

"What are you playing at Malfoy?" Ginny demanded.

"Playing?" Draco said, trying to act confused. "I'm not playing anything. I'm generally interested in you Weasley. So come on, why don't we have some fun?"

"Yeah right," Ginny laughed, "I'm not that gullible. You're up to something."

"Oh come on," Draco said, getting irritated, "You've got to be kidding me Weasley. I know you want me. I've seen you looking. I'm offering it to you right now, come on."

"I'd never touch you if you were the last person on the planet earth Malfoy!" Ginny said vehemently.

"Fuck Weasley!" Draco lost his patience. "Fine! You think I really wanted to go roll in the dirt with you anyway, yeah right! I can get any girl I want. I just thought I'd take pity on you."

"Screw you Malfoy!" Ginny snapped back. "I don't want or need your 'pity'!" With that, she turned away from him and stormed out of the closet, her red hair trailing behind her.

Draco groaned to himself, leaning back against the wall. "Dammit." He cursed, lashing out a stray bucked with his foot and then running a hand through his sleek hair. That didn't exactly go as planned, but his patience only held for so long. Sighing, he left the broom closet; determined to do better next time.

(--)

Hermione was sitting in the Gryffindor common room, helping Neville Longbottom out with some last minute charms homework. The rest of the common room was mostly quiet, though a few packs of students had gathered, talking in hushed tones. Hermione didn't mind.

"I just don't understand this bit Hermione," Neville said, trying to explain what he was having difficulty with, "it doesn't make any sense."

"Yes it does," Hermione said, pointing at the instructions on Neville's parchment, then frowning, "Oh, wait a minute, you're right. It doesn't make sense."

"It doesn't?" Neville asked, shocked that he was right for once.

"No," Hermione said distractedly, pulling out her own parchment, and showing him her notes, "see, you copied the incantation down wrong. Just change that 'i' to an 'e' and you've got it."

"Thanks Hermione," Neville said, blushing at his mistake, "I'm such a klutz, I don't know what I'd do without you."

"You'd do fine," Hermione said, "You just need to be a bit more confident is all."

Neville went back to his work whilst Hermione started to pack her bags. She was already a little late for meeting Harry and she didn't want him to get the wrong impression, so she hastily zipped up her bag and stood.

"Where are you going?" Neville asked, frowning up at her.

"Library." Hermione said.

"Again?" Neville sounded crushed, and Hermione felt ashamed that she'd been ignoring her best friend. "You always go the Library now. How come you don't ever study with me anymore?"

"Sorry Neville," Hermione said, and she really was, "but it's...I'm working on something really difficult and I don't want any distractions. Not that you're a distraction, sorry, I just...I'm sorry Neville."

"Well," Neville said, "could I come with you? I promise I won't distract you."

"Look," Hermione said, "it's kind of personal, okay Neville? Let me think about it?"

"Okay," Neville agreed, "when will you be back?"

"I don't know," Hermione said. "I might be out late. It depends."

"Well, I'll see you then." Neville said. "Thanks for helping me."

"It was my pleasure Neville. Bye."

Hermione quickly left the common room, frowning when Ginny Weasley came storming past her wearing her Quidditch robes, her face flushed. She shrugged and continued on her way, all but running to the Library. When she arrived she was out of breath and limping

more than she cared to admit. Her leg was sore and she cursed herself for putting too much excursion on it, embarrassed at how she must look. Harry didn't seem to mind; he just smiled at her and pulled out her chair for her. She dropped into it gratefully.

"Thank you," she gasped.

"You miss me that much?" Harry teased.

She smiled, swatting him lightly on the arm. "Big head." She teased back, forgetting all about her embarrassment.

"You okay?" Harry asked.

"Mmm." Hermione murmured. "I'm fine. Just...didn't want to be late."

"It's okay," Harry assured her.

"My friend Neville was asking me what I've been doing in the Library every night," Hermione confessed, "I hate lying to him, and I'm really bad at it as well, I don't think he believed me. He wanted to come with me."

"Oh," Harry appeared to not know what to say, so Hermione continued.

"I didn't tell him," she said, "but...can't I? I mean, he's a really nice person Harry, and he can keep a secret, I swear."

"I don't know," Harry said, looking thoughtful, "I guess it's tough for you to keep it from him. But I don't know."

"Do you trust me Harry?" Hermione asked.

"Of course I do," Harry said.

"Then trust me." Hermione stated. "I promise you, Neville won't tell anyone."

"He wouldn't have to," Harry argued, "some witches and wizards can just tell. Have you heard of Legilimency?"

"That's...I know it," Hermione said, holding up a hand and frowning in thought, "it's the mind reading ability isn't it? Delving into a person mind and memories."

"Yeah," Harry said, "so you see. He wouldn't have to tell anybody."

"But then neither would I?" Hermione countered. "If someone read my mind with Legilimency I would be just as vulnerable as Neville."

"Good point," Harry conceded, "I guess I'm just paranoid. Let me think about it, okay Hermione?"

"Sure," Hermione agreed, smiling. "Thanks Harry."

"I haven't said yes yet, you know."

"I know," Hermione said, "but you will."

"I will, will I?" Harry asked, smiling.

"Yeah," Hermione said, also smiling, "you can't say no to me."

Harry laughed. "Maybe not. You're just way too cute for your own good Hermione."

Hermione blushed. "You're not too bad yourself Harry."

"So," Harry began, "the first Hogsmeade trip is coming up. Do you want to go?"

"To Hogsmeade?" Hermione asked, surprised. "With you? In broad daylight? In public?"

Harry laughed. "Yeah, yeah, and yeah," he said, "I guess you're wondering how huh? I'll tell you, it's really quite simple. See, I invented this charm - "

"You *invented* a charm?" Hermione gasped, her eyes wide.

"Yes, I invented a charm." Harry clarified. "I got the idea from the Disillusionment Charm and the Metamorphmagi ability. It's like

combining the two. With it, everyone who looks at me will just see somebody completely unrecognisable.”

“But...” Hermione was flabbergasted. “But creating a charm. Harry, you’re only sixteen-years old! You can’t have invented a charm.”

“You don’t believe I could invent a charm?” Harry asked, looking slightly miffed. “I assure you Hermione, I invented this charm. It took me absolutely ages to get it right, but it works, and I invented it.”

“Harry,” Hermione said breathlessly, “that’s amazing. You really invented a charm?”

Harry gave her a look, as if to say, do I have to repeat myself?

“I’m sorry Harry,” Hermione said, “but it’s a little hard to believe. I believe you, I do, its just...wow.”

“So do you?” Harry got back to the point. “Do you want to go to Hogsmeade with me?”

“Of course I do!” Hermione practically shouted. “I’d love too.” She continued more softly, blushing again at her outburst.

“Great,” Harry said, before asking, “Have you ever been before?”

“I’ve been a few times,” Hermione admitted, “the first time we could go. But it was pretty boring, on my own, you know. Neville drags me down sometimes, but mostly, I just avoid it.”

“Well Hermione,” Harry said, “I promise you, this Hogsmeade trip you aren’t ever going to forget.”

“I can’t wait.” Hermione said, grinning at the thought of spending the entire day with Harry, in front of everyone.

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Ten

It was finally time for the first Hogsmeade weekend of the year. Students all over the castle talked excitably about what they would be doing, which shops they would visit first, and what they would buy. Most notably, it was the third years that were most excited, as this would be their first visit to Hogsmeade. First and Second years could only sit back and watch with jealous eyes, wishing they were allowed to go as well.

Harry waited for the crowds to die down before starting towards Hogsmeade. He had agreed to meet Hermione outside the Three Broomsticks, the local pub. He'd already cast his special, self-invented Imperceptible Charm. From now on, the only people who would be able to recognise him would be the ones he introduced himself too.

The weather wasn't perfect, but no one seemed to mind, trudging out through the snow packed ground to reach the magical village. Hogsmeade was as packed as it always was during the Hogsmeade weekend, students crowding the streets in a sea of black robes. Harry passed between them with no difficulty, smirking. His Charm worked like...well, like a charm.

He quickly found Hermione waiting for him outside the Three Broomsticks. She looked very pretty indeed, with her hair tied back in a ponytail, looking all snug with a scarf around her neck and a woolly hat on her head, her cheeks tinged pink from the cold and, if Harry wasn't mistaken, even wearing a little bit of lip gloss. He came to a stop right behind her, tapping her on the shoulder. She jumped and turned to look at him, frowning.

"It's me," he said with a smile, "Harry."

"Oh," she blinked, "right, sorry, I didn't recognise you."

"I know," Harry said.

"The Charm?" Hermione asked, catching on.

"Yeah," Harry confirmed, "shall we?" He offered her his hand and she took it with a smile. "Where to first?" They started down the busy street.

"I don't know," Hermione said, sounding mildly embarrassed, "I've never done this before. Neville and me usually just get any supplies we need, check out Scrivenshaft's Quill Shop, sometimes Honeydukes..." She trailed off.

"Well," Harry said, "we could go to Madam Puddifoot's, most girls like that place." Harry had trouble hiding his distaste for this suggestion. He'd never been, but had heard horror tales about it from many Slytherins, mainly Draco and Blaise.

"What's Madam Puddifoot's?" Hermione asked, curious.

"It's a tea shop," Harry answered, "but to be honest with you Hermione, I've heard a lot of awful stuff about that place. I'll go if you want too, but I'd rather not."

"Oh," Hermione said, even more curious now, "why is it so bad?"

"In Draco's words," Harry began, "it's cramped, full of frills and people snogging, and smells like two hundred bottles of perfume all put together."

"Sounds horrible," Hermione said, smiling at Harry's obvious disdain for the place, "let's go." She said, ginning mischievously.

"You're kidding me," Harry said, gaping at her like a fish out of water.

Hermione laughed. "Yeah, actually, I am."

Harry visibly relaxed, letting out a sigh of relief. "Thank God. I thought you were serious there for a second."

"Nope," Hermione said, "that place really does sound horrible. I'd rather just find a nice quiet spot and sit and talk."

"Talk?" Harry asked, wagging his eyebrows. "I didn't think there would be much talking."

“What did you have in mind?” Hermione questioned, playing along.

“Well,” Harry said, “let’s just say it’d be a lot more...hands on...than talking.”

“Pervert.” Hermione accused good-naturedly.

“Only when it comes to beautiful girls like you,” Harry said, “so, it’s pretty much just you.”

Hermione blushed, flattered at his compliment. A comfortable silence fell as they walked together, heading to nowhere in particular, just walking and enjoying each other’s company.

“How about we head back to the Three Broomsticks?” Harry offered. “It’s a pretty nice place. Much better than Madam Puddifoot’s.”

“Okay,” Hermione agreed.

So they turned around, heading back the way they had come, winding away through the crowd of students. No one seemed to pay them any attention, not even to Hermione. The charm really did work perfectly.

When they arrived outside the warm pub, Harry spotted Draco lingering around the door, as if waiting for someone. When Harry and Hermione passed him, he didn’t seem to notice a thing.

The inside of the warm pub was just as crowded as the street. Bubbling laughter and the chatter of conversation filled the room. Harry spotted Hagrid sitting at the far side of the pub, drinking a large pint of firewhisky on his own, and looking glum. Harry started towards him, pulling Hermione with him, but someone got in his way. Harry looked up, catching the eye of Ron Weasley. Harry tensed.

“Sorry,” Ron said, looking over Harry as if he wasn’t even there, and then continued on to his destination. He sat down at a table with his sister Ginny Weasley and his friends Dean and Seamus. Harry idly noticed Dean giving Ginny long lingering looks, which she seemed to be ignoring.

“Harry?” Hermione whispered in his ear, pulling him from his thoughts.

“Sorry,” Harry said, “come on, I want you to meet someone.”

Harry continued to drag Hermione over towards Hagrid, manoeuvring around the crowd. He stopped before the half-giant, who looking up, startled.

“Hey Hagrid,” Harry said.

Hagrid frowned, looking confused. Harry suddenly realised Hagrid wouldn’t be able to recognise him and went on.

“It’s Harry,” he whispered.

“O’,” Hagrid grunted, “didn’ recognise yeh ther Harry. An’ who’s this?” Hagrid asked, peering down at Hermione with his beetle black eyes.

“This is Hermione,” Harry said, sitting down and pulling Hermione with him.

“Hi,” Hermione said.

“Ello,” Hagrid greeted. “Ah remember yeh, from my classes, righ’ smart yeh were, weren’t yeh?”

“Thank you,” Hermione said, looking embarrassed again.

“Hagrid,” Harry got the giant man’s attention, “I’ve cast a charm on myself so no one will recognise me, so keep quiet okay?”

“O’,” Hagrid looked surprised, “tha’ why I couldn’ see yeh Harry?” Harry nodded. “An’ why yeh do tha’ then?”

“I don’t want to be recognised,” Harry said, “It’d cause a lot of fuss we just want to avoid.”

“We...” Hagrid looked between the two of the, then smiled, catching on, “Ah see, got yerself a girlfriend have yeh Harry?” Hagrid boomed out a laugh, and Harry quickly shushed him. Hagrid looked a little embarrassed. “Sorry.”

"It's okay," Harry said, "but keep it quiet right? Don't want anyone knowing right now."

"Righ'," Hagrid rumbled, "Got it."

"So how come you're sitting here all alone?" Harry asked. "You look like someone just died."

Hagrid sniffed, then wiped at his nose. "Not yet," he said, "but it's my friend, Aragog, he ain't doin' so good."

"I'm so sorry," Hermione said with a gasp, looking horrified.

"Thanks," Hagrid said, his black eyes shining, "yeh got yerself a good un' ther Harry. Don' let her go."

Hermione blushed at the compliment and Harry chuckled. "I know Hagrid," he said, "and don't worry. I won't."

They spent the rest of the evening talking to Hagrid, before bidding him goodbye and leaving the Three Broomsticks. Whilst walking up the snow-covered path, they heard a commotion up ahead, and then a scream. Harry, beginning to panic, started dragging Hermione up the path, running at full speed.

They reached a gathering of students, all closing in around the figure of girl writhing on the floor. Harry came to a stop, Hermione following suit, bending down and panting.

"What happened?" Harry heard some yell, over the screaming.

"I don't know," someone said. "She was just arguing with her friend about something, and then she rose into the air, and started screaming."

"What's going on here?" It was Professor Snape, who came swooping down on the students.

"She's been attacked!" Someone screamed.

“What’s this?” Hagrid voice came from behind Harry, before he came striding past them with booming footsteps and stopped before the still writhing girl.

“Get her up to the castle,” Professor Snape ordered Hagrid, then turned his attention to the students, “and the rest of you, go on now, back up to the castle.”

The students started to slowly break away from the scene, following Hagrid when he picked up the girl (Harry thought he recognised her, but couldn’t quite place her) and took off towards Hogwarts. One particular girl, the one who was screaming, was running after Hagrid.

“Harry?” Hermione whispered breathlessly. “We should go.”

“Wait a moment,” Harry said, lingering out of the way.

“But - ” Hermione went to argue, but Harry grabbed her hand and shushed her.

Harry was too busy staring at Snape to worry about offending Hermione, who looked rather upset at being shushed. Harry watched as Snape looked around, before leaning down and picking up a torn package (carefully) that had been dropped on the floor. He tucked the torn paper wrapping the package back around the object, but not before Harry could see what it was – an ornate looking opal necklace. Professor Snape then pocketed the necklace wrapped in paper and hurried away, back up the school. He hadn’t even noticed Harry and Hermione watching him.

“Harry,” Hermione said softly, her brow creased, “what was all that about?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said, “but I’m going to find out. Come on.”

Harry started to walk back towards the castle, pulling Hermione along with him. Hermione was still looking at Harry, who was staring ahead, his eyes glazed over, lost in thought. Hermione looked worried and scared.

(--)

Ginny Weasley was getting rather annoyed. She had agreed to come down to Hogsmeade to spend some time with her older brother Ron, but he had failed to mention he wouldn't be alone. In fact, Ginny wouldn't have minded, had it been anyone but Dean Thomas.

Ginny had been dating Dean for a while last year, being rather attracted to the dark-skinned wizard, but had quickly found him to be rather...dull. He was even worse than the boyfriend she had before him, Michael Corner, who she had at least got along with. But all she and Dean had done was fight. Unfortunately, when she dumped him, he had been rather upset. Inexplicably, her older brother had also been upset. He seemed to have some idealized view of their relationship, and seemed to want to push her into getting back together with one of his best friends. But Ginny had no intention of doing that.

Ginny and Dean Thomas were over, and no matter how much her brother Ron tried to set them up, or how many times Dean tried to get her attention, nothing would change that. So having to sit at a table with them both was practically torture.

And then there was what she had taken to calling the Malfoy problem. For some reason, the notorious Slytherin Draco Malfoy had taken to jumping out at her whenever she was alone and cornering her, before proceeding to come on to her. Ginny had lost track of the amount of times that had happened over the last week or so.

What only made it worse was the fact that she was rather attracted to the blonde. Despite his horrible behaviour and reputation, he was still quite a good-looking boy, and she certainly was attracted to him. But not even that was enough to overcome her disgust at him. He stood for everything she hated. He was one of the Pureblood fanatics. And if that wasn't enough, everyone knew his father was a Death Eater, so he would most likely follow in his father's footsteps.

"So Ginny," Dean said, breaking into her internal musing, "do you want to go for a walk or something? We could go to the Shrieking Shack."

“Dean,” Ginny groaned in frustration, “how many times do I have to tell you – and *you* Ron! – that I am not interested in getting back together with you.”

“But,” Dean began to argue, but Ginny interrupted him.

“But nothing Dean, we’re over, done, finished. Got it?”

Dean scowled, but didn’t say anything. Ginny sighed, before downing the rest of her Butterbeer, grimacing at the taste, and then gathering her stuff and leaving the three boys sitting at the round table. She heard Seamus snigger behind her, but kept on walking.

“Aye, I think she doesn’t like you mate,” Seamus said, but whatever else happened between the boys Ginny didn’t find out, as she left them behind and exited the Three Broomsticks.

The cold air hit her like a slap in the face and she shuddered, wrapping her cloak more tightly around her and pulling up her scarf to better ward off the wind and snow. Ginny rushed down the main street of Hogsmeade, wondering where the usual crowd had got to, when she heard a noise coming from down a nearby alley. She stopped, peering into the alley, but couldn’t see anything.

She slowly started to make her way into the alley, knowing she was probably making a mistake, but unable to do anything about it. Curiosity - what a bitch. Ginny stopped at the mouth of the alley.

“Hello?” she called softly.

She cautiously crept further into the alleyway, her hand reaching down and gripping the wand in the pocket, ready to defend herself. The wind gusted, sending her robes billowing around her and a chill up her spine. She heard the crunch of footsteps descending on snow behind her, and quickly turned, but it was too late.

She was forced up against the wall of the alley, a scream dying in her throat when she saw her assailant. Not again, she wanted to groan, but at the same time fear coursed all through her. She was at his mercy this time, totally and truly. Draco Malfoy had her trapped down

an alley, up against a wall, with no one around to come to her rescue if he decided to get a little frisky.

"Hello Weasley," Malfoy whispered, his warm breath heating up her chill face, he was that close to her, "did you miss me?"

"How many times are you going to try this with me before you give up Malfoy?" Ginny asked, fighting down her terror. Oh how she much preferred Dean's constant staring to this. She was starting to regret turning down that walk.

"Only until you give in Weasley," Malfoy continued in his lazy drawl, smirking, "which I'm sure will be very, very soon. Perhaps even now, what do you say, up for some fun? I've always wondering what it'd be like to do it snow, haven't you?"

Ginny shuddered in disgust, unable to stop the image of herself and Draco Malfoy tangled together, naked, in the snow. Ginny squeezed her eyes shut, willing her mind blank. When she opened them again, Draco was smirking at her, almost as if he could read her thoughts.

"You disgust me!" she spat.

"Do I?" Draco chuckled, his laugh sending goose bumps down her spine. Why did he get to her like this? Affect her this way. "I'm not so sure. I think, no, I know you want me too. So why fight it? Give in." This he whispered right in her ear, and his tongue snaked out at the end, licking her ear.

That was enough for her. She pushed as hard as she could, forcing him away, her cheeks burning with her own embarrassment, but also with desire. Ginny clenched her hands, the one wrapped around her wand almost snapping the magical object.

"Don't you dare ever touch me again Malfoy!" Ginny shouted, as loud as she could, hoping someone would hear her.

"Don't lie to me Weasley," Draco said, sliding up her again, and she put her arms up weakly, trying to push him away again, "I can smell your desire." He sniffed the air for good measure and grinned at her.

She was trapped again, her head against the wall, between his two arms.

"Please don't," Ginny found herself begging, and hated herself for it.

"Don't what?" Draco asked wickedly, his grin turning in a smirk, as he leant his head in closer, his lips almost touching hers now.

Ginny involuntarily felt her eyes slipping closed, and knew her mouth was wide open, panting, and she could feel Draco's own lips just lightly brushing her own, before finally consuming her, his tongue snaking out like before, but this time delving into her mouth. She felt her own tongue rise to meet Draco's own, clashing in the middle. Ginny's arms rose and wrapped around Draco's neck, clutching to him. She felt like she no longer had control of her body, and for now, she couldn't find the energy to care. She just poured it all into the kiss.

When finally her senses seemed to come back to her, her eyes snapped open in horror, and she stopped kissing him, instead resuming her futile struggle against his chest. When Draco tried to kiss her again, she bit his tongue, and he pulled back with a muffled curse, before shouting.

"Fuck Weasley," Draco snapped, "you little fucking tease, what the hell are you playing at?"

Ginny was heaving, her chest rising and falling rapidly, her face flushed with lust, embarrassment and anger. She raised her head high, met Draco's startling silver eyes with her own brown ones, and then slapped him as hard as she could. Draco reeled back with a hiss, his pale cheek reddening.

"You bastard!" Ginny shouted. "Don't you ever dare touch me again!"

And then she fled. She ran as fast as she could, leaving the alley behind, leaving Draco behind, but she couldn't run away from the truth. She had just kissed Draco Malfoy. And she had loved every second of it.

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Eleven

“Harry,” Hermione pleaded, whilst being pulled along by the Slytherin to some unknown destination, “please tell me what’s going on. Where are we going?”

Harry had dragged her all the way back to Hogwarts after they had witnessed whatever it was that had happened to Katie Bell, the Gryffindor chaser, and all the way Hermiones head has been practically spinning with questions. Why was Harry acting like this? She had never seen him so frantic. He was normally so calm and rational, but something about what had happened had made his calm persona fall away like a flimsy veil in a harsh wind.

So many questions, but the one at the forefront of her mind, the one she should have asked a long time ago. Was He Who Must Not Be Named really back? Was that why Harry was so worried? Did You Know Who have something to do with what happened to Katie? But that was crazy, why would the most powerful dark wizard in the world (if he even really existed) want to attack a poor helpless student? Not to mention, how?

“Harry please,” Hermione continued to plead, “Answer me. Does this have something to do with You Know Who?”

Harry stopped suddenly, turning to face her sharply. His eyes held something in them she had never seen before, but what was it? Fear? No, she didn’t think so. Worry? Maybe a little. But whatever it was, it scared her.

“Not here Hermione,” was all Harry said, before pulling her along behind him again, “we can talk once I’m sure no one will overhear us. Then you can ask me anything you want, okay?”

“Okay,” Hermione murmured, the intensity in Harry scaring her more than she cared to admit. What had she gotten herself into? Did she make a mistake in trusting Harry? Was he really the psychotic dark wizard in the making most people perceived him to be? He seemed so normal, up until now...

“Here,” Harry finally said, dragging her into an abandoned dungeon that looked like it used to be a classroom, but had long since been forgotten. “Claudos,” Harry put a quick Locking Charm on the door, and then, “Silencio,” added a Silencing Charm on the room. He finally turned to face Hermione, who hadn’t taken her eyes off him for second. When she didn’t endeavour to speak, Harry frowned, “Well?”

“Well?” Hermione murmured, and despite herself found a grin creeping up on her face, followed by a burst of laughter, although she wasn’t amused. “Well? Are you insane Harry? First you go all crazy on me, drag me all the way back here, without a word of explanation, and then you dump me in this room, expecting me to understand what’s going on? Well?”

“Look,” Harry said, holding up a hand to stop her when she attempted to speak again, “let me explain then. Like I said outside, I needed to find a place to talk privately with you. Sometimes I can’t just tell you what I’m doing Hermione, you just have to trust me. I’m sorry if I rattled you but it was necessary.”

“Rattled?” Hermione screeched. “You think rattled is the word? Try terrified! What is going on?”

“Voldemort,” Harry said, and grimaced when Hermione winced, “that’s what’s going on. Or at least I expect.”

“So he really is back then?” Hermione asked.

“What?” Harry spluttered. “What do you mean ‘he’s really back then’? You didn’t think he was back before, after all Dumbledore and I did to tell everyone? You think it was a practical joke? That me and Dumbledore and Cedric Diggory are all sitting up in the headmaster’s office having a good laugh. Cedric is dead Hermione. I watched him die, and then I watched Lord Voldemort rise again!”

Hermione had tears in her eyes now, wondering how she could have ever believed the boy in front of her, who was also crying, was anything but a great person. Wondering how she could have doubted his sincerity when he told the world You Know Who was back.

"I'm sorry Harry," Hermione sniffed, rubbing at her eyes, "I didn't mean...I'm sorry. Of course I believe you."

And she did, and that was a scary thought all in itself. It was true then. You Know Who was back, and if Hermione thought she was terrified before, she was really terrified now. What made it worse was, no one believed Harry and Dumbledore. No one was doing anything to try and stop him.

"It's okay," Harry said vehemently, and she could see the anger coursing through him, the emotions raging through his body after finally being let loose, and he turned away from her so she could no longer see him cry.

"Harry," Hermione set her hand on his shoulder and turned him to face her. He was looking down at the ground, his eyes sparkling with tears, and Hermione found herself just wanting to kiss them all away. She placed a hand on the curve of his cheek, making him look at her. "It's okay to cry. I won't tell anyone. You can cry in front of me, if you want."

And Harry did, letting out torrent upon torrent of salty tears, burying his face in her shoulder. She just put her hands around him, holding him close. By the power of the sobs going through him and how much his shoulders were shaking Hermione suspected Harry hadn't cried in years, and that all of this had been slowly building, until now.

When he finally stopped crying, he pulled away from her, regarding her soaked shoulder with some embarrassment. She smiled a sad smile at her, which she returned.

"Sorry," he said, "I didn't mean to drench your shoulder."

"It's okay," Hermione assured him, "I'm just glad you're okay now. You are, aren't you?"

"Yeah," Harry said, wiping at the remnant tears on his cheeks and rubbing his eyes, "I'm fine now. It actually felt pretty nice, relieving, you know. So, err, thank you."

"Your welcome."

“So,” Harry rubbed the back of his head, not really knowing how to act around Hermione now that she had seen his weaker side, “want to ask me some questions?”

“I just want to know what’s going on Harry,” Hermione said, “If I’m going to be a part of your life, I need to know. And I think I deserve it as well, don’t you?”

“Of course,” Harry said, “I always intended to tell you Hermione. It’s just hard for me, to trust people, though I want to trust you. I do trust you. It’s why we’re here.”

“Me too,” Hermione agreed, “I trust you too. So, why don’t you tell me about...You Know Who, and whatever got you so spooked earlier.”

“You should say his name Hermione,” Harry advised, “Dumbledore always told me, ‘Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself’. It’s one of his better quotes. You should remember it.”

“It’s hard Harry,” Hermione admitted, “saying his name. How do you do it?”

“I do it because I know it’s silly to think saying his name will bring down his wrath on you,” Harry said, and Hermione blushed at the unintentional insult, “and you know it’s silly Hermione. And I know something else, and that is that you aren’t the silly type, so quit being afraid of his name, okay?”

“I’ll try,” Hermione said.

“Good,” Harry began, “and now I think you wanted me to tell you about Voldemort. Understand that what I tell you does not leave this room, you cannot tell anyone, not even your friend Neville. Okay?”

Hermione nodded.

“Right then,” Harry took a breath, before plunging in. “Voldemort came back at the end of our fourth year, when I came back from the Triwizard Maze with Cedric’s body. What Dumbledore told everyone is true, but he left out key facts, facts that have been kept secret by the Ministry. When Cedric and I reached the Triwizard Cup we had

both suffered a little damage, and saved each other's lives at least once, so we decided to take the cup at the same time. But the Cup turned out to be a Portkey, and we ended up in a graveyard in Little Hangleton, the home of the Riddles. The Riddles are the Muggle side of Voldemorts family - "

"You mean he isn't a pureblood?" Hermione asked, rather surprised.

Harry laughed. "No, he isn't a pureblood. He's a half-blood like me. Witch Mother, Muggle Father. Anyway, Voldemort needed a bone of his father for the resurrection spell, so the graveyard was a perfect place to perform it. He also needed the blood of a servant, he used Wormtail, the wizard who betrayed my parents to Voldemort the night he tried to kill me. I'll tell you more about that later, I've got a lot to get through."

"Okay."

"The last ingredient he needed was the blood of an enemy, which is -"

"Where you come in, right." Hermione finished. "And Cedric?"

"He was an unexpected complication," Harry said, "so they...killed him. Then they Wormtail tied me up and performed the spell. Voldemort came back and summoned his Death Eaters, Lucius Malfoy included." Harry said the word with such venom that Hermione almost jumped.

"But...?" Hermione faltered, blushing a little.

"What is it?"

"Aren't you," Hermione began, "friends with Malfoy? I mean, Draco Malfoy."

"Yeah," Harry confirmed, "but that doesn't mean I'm a friend of his fathers. Trust me Hermione, Draco hates his father as much as I hate him. Draco is on my side, just like you. He would never admit it, but Draco is as loyal as a Hufflepuff."

Hermione couldn't help but smile at that.

"Back on track," Harry said, before continuing his tale, "Voldemort did his thing, punished a couple of Death Eaters for renouncing him after his fall, and then untied me so we could dual. He never expected that my wand would be the brother wand to his own though, and when we tried to attack each other, I'm sure you know what happened. You've probably read all about it."

"Priori Incantatem?" Hermione said, her eyes alight with wonder. "What was it like? What happened?"

"I can tell you all about that later," Harry said, unable to hide his amusement at Hermione's enthusiasm, "but for now, let's stick to the facts. So wands clashed, Priori Incantatem happened, and then I just about managed to escape using the Triwizard Cup, dragging myself and Cedric's body back with me."

"But Harry," Hermione said, finally realising something amongst all that she was being forced to take in, and it was a hell of a lot, "how could the Cup be a Portkey. Someone would have had to access it to change it into one, and I'm sure it would have been on Hogwarts ground for the entire time, so how would Vol...Vol...You Know Who and his Death Eaters get to it." Hermione blushed, being unable to say You Know Who's name.

"Because one Death Eater was at Hogwarts," Harry said, "and again Hermione, what I'm about to tell you cannot leave this room. It's very important you understand me."

"I do."

"Good," Harry said gladly, "the Death Eater was disguised as a teacher, using Polyjuice Potion."

"You mean?" Hermione asked, and she didn't have to say the name, Harry knew she had figured it out already.

"Mad Eye Moody," Harry verified, "was actually Barty Crouch Jr., long thought dead in Azkaban. It's a long story," Harry said, seeing Hermione's mouth open in question again, "which I'll save for a later

date I think. Point was, Crouch turned the Cup into a Portkey to take me to Voldemort, and then when I returned, he tried to finish me off. But Dumbledore, Snape and Professor McGonagall stopped him before that could happen.”

“Then what?” Hermione was hanging on his very word.

“Dumbledore used Veritaserum on Crouch and he told us everything,” Harry answered, “Dumbledore and everyone else took me to the Hospital Wing, as you can imagine, I was a bit shocked, running on overload, you know. But while we were gone, Minister Fudge had Dementors brought in and they performed the Dementors kiss on Crouch, before he could confess everything. Dumbledore tried to convince Fudge that Voldemort was back, but he would have any of it. No matter what we said, he refused to believe it. He’s scared, I think. Either way, he’s an idiot, and a pathetic Minister for Magic, but we can’t do anything about that at the moment, we have bigger things to worry about.”

“So what did you do then?” Hermione asked, glossing over Harrys blatant slandering of the Minister for Magic and his obvious distaste for the wizard.

“Dumbledore reformed the Order of the Phoenix,” Harry said, “an old resistance that fought Voldemort last time, with mostly new members of course, but some old ones as well, including the real Mad Eye Moody. My godfather Sirius and Remus as well.”

“Professor Lupin?” Hermione asked, surprised.

“Yeah,” Harry said, “he was one of my dads best friends in school, along with Sirius and...Wormtail. Anyway, Professor Snape is also in the Order of the Phoenix, but he works as a spy for Dumbledore, because he used to be a Death Eater.”

“Oh my,” Hermione gasped, eyes wide. “He was a Death Eater? And Professor Dumbledore lets him teach here?”

“Dumbledore trust Snape,” Harry defended his mentor, though without much conviction.

"It sounds like you don't," Hermione observed. "Is that why you waited to see what Professor Snape did? When he picked up at that package."

"Yeah," Harry confirmed, "it was a necklace. I think I've seen it before as well, but I'll have to check to make sure, I didn't really get a good look. But if it's the one I think it is, it was a cursed necklace, and whoever puts it on is as good as dead. My guess is that girl - "

"Katie Bell," Hermione told him, "her name is Katie Bell, she's on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, so you should know her."

"Right," Harry said, "I knew I recognised her from somewhere. Anyway, my guess if Bell touched the necklace when she was arguing with her friend and got zapped by it."

"But why would she have it?" Hermione questioned.

"That's the bit that's got me worried," Harry said, "could you ask around for me, see if you can find more information on what happened, what Katie did before she touched the necklace, stuff like that."

"Of course," Hermione assured him, "I'll try my best."

"I need to go speak with Dumbledore about all this," Harry said, "so I'll see you tomorrow, right? Library at the usual time?"

"Sure," Hermione agreed, giving him a reassuring smile.

"Right," Harry gave a smile, a quick kiss on the cheek, and then dashed from the room with a quick 'Alohomora'. Hermione raised her hand to the spot he had kissed, blushing, but she couldn't help feeling a little disappointed. She'd hoped he would have kissed her properly, something that Harry hadn't done at all. He only ever kissed her cheek. Frowning and thinking about everything she'd just been told, she started back towards the Gryffindor common room.

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Twelve

Harry found himself outside Dumbledores office, staring at the gargoyle blocking the way. He didn't know if it would work, but he decided to try the password Dumbledore had given him only a few days ago via the note telling him about their second lesson.

Luckily, it was the right password, and the gargoyle moved aside and allowed him entrance. He moved up the spiral staircase until he came to the door to Dumbledores office. He knocked and after a few moments was told to enter. Dumbledore was sitting behind his desk, watching Harry with his blue eyes as he moved into the room.

"Ah, Harry," Dumbledore greeted, "and to what do I owe this early pleasure. If I'm not mistaken, our lesson was not for another two days."

"Sir," Harry said, in his own greeting, "I've come from Hogsmeade. I take it you heard about what happened to the girl, Katie Bell."

"Indeed," Dumbledore replied, "I am awaiting an owl from St. Mungo's right now, in fact."

"St. Mungo's?" Harry asked in surprise. "It's that bad?"

"I'm afraid so," Dumbledore said sadly, "now, did you wish to tell me something?"

"Sir," Harry began, "I just wanted to know if you've talked to Professor Snape yet? He was there, he broke up the crowd and told Hagrid to bring the Bell girl back to Hogwarts."

"I have," Dumbledore verified, "may I ask why you ask me this?"

"It's just," Harry said, wondering how to word it without making it sound like an accusation, "I saw him pick up something. I think the Bell girl touched it. I just wanted to make sure you knew about it."

"I do," Dumbledore again confirmed, "but I wonder, why are you asking me this? Do you not trust Professor Snape?"

Harry paused. "I have no evidence," Harry said, "but no, I don't trust him."

"I see," Dumbledore replied, "and again, may I ask why?"

"Like I said," Harry said, "I have no evidence. Just my gut feeling and a few suspicions. If you don't mind me saying sir, I'd be carefully exactly how much you tell Severus Snape, if I was you."

"But you are not," Dumbledore said, "and I trust Severus Snape. Although, I would like to talk to you about this matter more during our lesson, I am very interested in hearing your suspicions."

"And sir," Harry said, making his way towards the door, "I think the necklace is cursed. If that helps at all, you know, in healing the Bell girl."

"I also reached that conclusion." Dumbledore agreed. "But what troubles me most, is why a student would have a cursed necklace in the first place, and what was she doing bringing it back to the castle."

"Me too," Harry said, "maybe I'll have some more information for you by the time Monday comes around. Goodbye Professor."

"Goodbye Harry."

(--)

The next two days passed agonisingly slowly for Harry, who, after hearing what Hermione had to say about the incident with Katie Bell, was desperate to see Dumbledore. When the time finally arrived, Harry rushed to the Headmasters office and said the password, before heading up the spiral staircase and entering, without knocking.

"Harry," Dumbledore said, looking up from a piece of parchment he was bending over, "you're early."

"Sorry sir," Harry said, taking a seat across from Dumbledore, "but I've got some important stuff I want to tell you."

"I see," Dumbledore sat back in his chair and looked at Harry over his half-moon spectacles, "then proceed."

"It's about the Bell girl," Harry went on, "I managed to find out what she was doing before she started back to Hogwarts. She was in the Three Broomsticks. Her friend said she went to the bathroom and when she came back, she had the package and was acting very odd."

Dumbledore's eyes widened a fraction and he murmured, "I see," before rolling up the parchment on his desk and placing it in an open drawer. He stood up and started to pace the room. "And you think she was Imperiused I assume?"

"That was the conclusion I got," Harry said, "but it's the why that bugs me."

"Indeed," Dumbledore agreed, "obviously the necklace was intended for someone at Hogwarts and the attacker didn't want it to be traced back to them."

"Any idea who the target was?" Harry asked. "Or who the attacker might be. The Bell girl was Imperiused in the girl's bathroom, so it could be a girl. Then again, it could just be someone taking Polyjuice potion to look like a girl."

"Correct," Dumbledore agreed, "unfortunately, we have too little information to go on to form an accurate accusation. At the moment, it could have been anyone, boy, girl, student, adult."

"I'll keep digging around," Harry said, "maybe I can find something more conclusive."

"Yes," Dumbledore said, "as will I. Though I caution you not to forget about your classes Harry. They are also very important."

"Have I ever Professor?" Harry said, smiling slightly.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled and he smiled as well. "Right," Dumbledore persisted, "now then, on with the lesson, I think."

(--)

As Harry expected, Draco was waiting for him when he returned to the Slytherin common room after his second lesson with Dumbledore. The young Malfoy was sitting in his usual spot, feet propped up on another chair and idly flicking through a book, though Harry suspected he wasn't really reading it. Harry sat down across from him and leant back, letting out a sigh. It had been one hell of a long day.

"Well?" Draco prodded.

"It was pretty much the same as our first lesson," Harry started, "he showed me another memory, this one his own. It was when he went to visit Voldemort at the orphanage he lived in and invite him to Hogwarts. Basically, he wanted me to know that Voldemort had been actively using magic before he even knew he was a wizard, that he hates his name, likes to steal stuff and that he doesn't have any friends."

"Sounds kinda like someone I know," Draco teased.

Harry glared at him, his eyes darkening to a dark green. "Shut up Malfoy, you have no idea what you're talking about. I'm nothing like him."

"Woah," Draco held up his hands in a peace sign, "I was kidding. Calm down. I know you're nothing like that bastard...thankfully."

Harry visibly relaxed. "Sorry, I'm a little on edge. I don't like this," Harry said, "everything that's been going on recently. It's not right."

"You mean about that Gryffindor chaser right?" Draco asked.

"Yeah," Harry said, "it's just not right Draco. I found something, come with me." And Harry got up, heading towards the exit, with Draco trailing after him.

They left the common room behind, heading towards Slytherins secret chamber. When they reached the cloaked wizard statue, Harry looked around, checking for signs of life, and when he found none, he

hissed '*open*' in Parsletongue and entered the chamber. Draco followed.

Draco took a seat on the green couch whilst Harry went into the bedroom and returned with a book, which he passed to Draco. The book was nondescript, hardback and complete black with not even a title. The only thing remarkable about it was the flamboyantly green bookmark sticking out of it, shaped like a snake.

"Open it," Harry said, sitting down on the sofa as well.

Draco opened the book at the bookmark and studied the page, his eyes drawn to the drawing of an opal necklace. He scanned the text, his features slowly changing as realisation dawned upon him.

"This is it, isn't it?" Draco asked, but he didn't really need Harry to confirm it. His eyes met Harry over the top of the book. "This is the necklace that the chaser touched."

"I think so," Harry said, "I knew I'd seen it before, and this is where. That's one of Slytherins Dark Arts books. Specifically, it deals with Dark Objects. That necklace was created years before even Slytherin himself was born. But the only mention of it is in this book; I've tried looking through everything else I own, more up to date stuff, but nothing. It's like it just fell off the face of the earth."

"Wait a minute," Draco said, his eyes scanning the page again, before locking on the picture once more. "I've seen this necklace before! It was in Borgin and Burkes when I went with my father just before our second year, and again when I was there before fourth year."

"It was in a shop?" Harry asked, not able to believe that this legendary cursed necklace was in a shop down Knockturn Alley, especially Borgin and Burkes.

"Yeah," Draco said, and he laughed, "I remember looking at it with Blaise, that seventh year Travis Grimsby and Parkinson. That idiot Burke was trying to sell it as some dangerous muggle killing necklace or something. Really cheap as well. He probably had no idea what he even had."

"Who was with you?" Harry asked, suspicions forming in his mind.

"Blaise," Draco began, "Grimsby and Parkinson. Maybe some others, I can't be sure. It was one of those rare times the shop was full - loads of Death Eater families. You know that Grimsby guy's father is one of Voldemort's most loyal followers."

"No one else?" Harry asked, wanting to make sure.

"I don't think so," Draco said, "but I can't be sure. Crabbe and Goyle might have been." Draco threw in the last bit, just to let Harry know he wasn't completely sure and to not take anything he said as fact.

"Right," Harry said, frowning in thought.

"You think one of them did it?" Draco queried.

"Maybe," Harry said, "least we have a starting point."

"Harry," Draco said, "come on. You really think Blaise would have done it? Or Parkinson, I know she's a bitch, but she isn't a Death Eater."

"No," Harry said, "I don't think it was Blaise or Parkinson. I think it was probably one of the kids who have Death Eater parents. Remember what your dad said to you."

"Special assignment," Draco said, catching on, "you think this is it? You think some student has been made a Death Eater and given this assignment, whatever it is."

"Yeah," Harry said, "I do. I think it was Grimsby. Death Eater parents, he's pretty smart, he could probably brew Polyjuice potion and Imperius some Gryffindor. Of course, it's not final, but it makes sense, don't you think?"

"Yeah," Draco consented, "I guess it does. Voldemort certainly wouldn't be against sending some seventeen year old to his death for whatever it is he wants done. It's not like he preaches morals, huh?"

Harry laughed, a little grimly. "Exactly."

“So what now?” Draco asked.

“We find out more about Grimsby,” Harry said, “and see if we can figure out who the target is.”

Harry and Draco spent the rest of the night mulling it over, but by the time dawn arrived and they left for the Slytherin dormitory, they were still no closer to figuring it out.

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Thirteen

Harry and Draco spent the entire week trying to figure out whom Voldemort wanted dead at Hogwarts. Harry could only come up with three candidates, those being himself, Professor Slughorn (for that was one of the reasons the old Professor had agreed to come back to Hogwarts, for fear of Voldemort) and of course, Headmaster Dumbledore.

"Would Voldemort really try to get a student to kill off Dumbledore?" Draco had asked, scepticism in his tone.

Harry thought he had a point, but still, Dumbledore was one of the candidates, and Harry was going to keep an open mind. He wouldn't put anything past Voldemort.

They also took an effort to keep an eye on the seventh year Slytherin Travis Grimsby, who certainly fit the bill. He was shady looking, with sallow skin and a permanent frown on his face. But that turned out to be harder than expected, due to the fact he was a seventh year, and they were only sixth years. They could tail him all they wanted outside of class, but once he was inside the classroom, that was that.

Despite this, they watched him as closely as they could, but he showed no outward signs of being a Death Eater, except for the fact he always wore long sleeves, but that didn't really prove anything. Harry suggested Draco ask around the girls to see if any of them had seen him at least sleeveless since his return to Hogwarts, but Draco had just given him a degusted look and laughed, before telling him, literally, to fuck off.

So the weekend arrived, and Harry resolved to put the mystery out of his mind for the time being, so that he could concentrate on something equally as important to him. He had asked Hermione to meet him outside the Gryffindor common room on Saturday night when the rest of the school was in the Great Hall, enjoying the feast. At first she was sceptical, asking him over and over again what he had planned, but she had finally agreed. He wanted it to be a surprise.

When Harry arrived outside Gryffindor tower, wearing his invisibility cloak and carrying his Marauders Map, he found Hermione waiting for

him, dressed in wonderfully blue robes with silver trim and with her hair put up in a twist with only a few strands falling down around her. She looked stunning, and Harry took the time to admire her, before checking the map for sign of life and, when satisfied they would not be disturbed, he whipped off the cloak.

Hermione jumped, shocked at seeing him just appear out of thin air, and exclaimed: "Harry! What...? How did you...?"

"Invisibility Cloak," Harry replied, holding up the silvery cloak, "I'll explain later."

"...Okay." Hermione agreed, after observing him bewilderingly for a few moments.

"You look beautiful." Harry complimented her, brushing a stray strand of hair from her face.

"Thank you," she said, flushing, "you too. Handsome, I mean, you look handsome."

"Don't I always," Harry said with a grin, and she smiled in response and lightly shoved him.

"Big head," she teased.

"Anyway," Harry said, cutting into their playful banter, "come on - under the cloak. I don't want anyone to see us, we'll probably get in trouble."

"In trouble?" Hermione asked, puzzled. "What are we doing Harry?"

"You'll see," he said, ushering her under the cloak.

"...Okay," she said, trusting him.

She got under the cloak and the two of them made their way down to the entrance hall, passed the Great Hall, and then out through the double doors. They were almost caught by Filch, but he could no more see them under the cloak than he could perform a simple spell.

Harry led her around the grounds, towards the Whomping Willow. She turned her chocolate eyes on him when she first saw the violent tree come into view, but didn't say a word, at first. When it became clear they were heading straight to the tree, she whispered in his ear:

"Harry? Where are you taking me?"

"Hang on," Harry said, pulling out the Marauders Map and checking it again for signs of life. Hermione watched him in puzzlement, looking at the map with curiosity in her eyes. "Okay, stay here one second."

Harry ducked out from under the cloak and seized a tree branch that was placed conveniently on the ground near them, which Harry had placed there earlier in the day. He jabbed at the special knot in the tree and the branches stopped swaying.

"Okay," Harry said, grabbing her hand through the cloak, "come on." And he pulled her along, racing towards the hole that was concealed below the old tree.

"Harry?" Hermione squealed in fright, expecting to be pummelled at any moment by the tree's aggressive branches.

They reached the tree's roots and Harry pointed to the hole. "Go on, I'll be right behind you."

"In there?" Hermione asked, looking at her expensive robes.

"Go on," Harry said, "it's okay. You'll be fine and I'll be right behind you."

"Okay," Hermione slowly lowered herself down and Harry watched her carefully to make sure she was okay. He then followed after her, down into the darkness. His feet hit the ground with a thud and he felt Hermione seize his arm.

"Harry?" Hermione asked, her voice coming from right next to him in the darkness, sounding a little scared. "Where are we going?"

“It’s okay Hermione,” Harry assured her, “no need to worry. I’ve been down here loads of time and I’ve never been hurt. We don’t have far to go now, so just be patient, okay?”

“Okay,” Hermione whispered, but she didn’t let go off his arm as he led her down the dark tunnel.

They had to crouch for the most part as they went down the earthy corridor, following its path when it bent, until eventually they saw a light at the end of the tunnel. Hermione let out a relieved sigh as Harry led her up into the deserted house. Hermione squinted in the light and then looked around at the dilapidated shack with confusion, and then dawning realisation.

“The Shrieking Shack!” she said, turning scared eyes to Harry. “What are we doing here?”

“It’s okay Hermione,” Harry said, “Like I said before, I’ve been here loads of times.”

“But isn’t it haunted?” Hermione asked, peering all around, as if she expected ghosts to just pop out from behind one of the broken pieces of furniture and shout ‘boo!’.

“No Hermione,” Harry went on, leading her further into the broken down house, manoeuvring around the destroyed furniture, “that was just a legend to make people stay away. This place was built, including the tunnel and the planting of the Whomping Willow, the year my father started at Hogwarts.”

“But why?” Hermione asked, now sounding infinitely curious.

“It was built for Professor Lupin,” Harry said, leading her up the rickety staircase.

“Professor Lupin?” Hermione gasped, shocked.

“Yeah,” Harry continued, “you know he’s a werewolf. He was one when he came to Hogwarts, that’s why Dumbledore had this place built. He would come here every full moon and have free reign when

he transformed, so he wouldn't hurt anybody. That's what all the screaming people heard was about, not ghost, just Remus."

"How do you know all this?" Hermione breathed. Harry could tell she had many questions she wanted to ask.

"You remember in our third year," Harry started, "when the Ministry had Dementors at Hogwarts to catch Sirius Black."

"Yeah," Hermione replied, completely enthralled in his story as he led her down a hallway.

"Well," Harry went on, "the Ministry thought Sirius was after me. You know, everyone though he killed a load of Muggles and a wizard in support of Voldemort, after my parents where killed."

"I remember," Hermione said, "I read about it in the Daily Prophet. They said he was supposed to have betrayed your parents to You Know Who, but it was the other wizard, right? Peter Pettigrew. The wizard he was supposed to have killed."

"That's right," Harry said, "when I found out I wanted to kill him for betraying my parents. I was talking to Draco one evening, towards the end of the year, and we saw Ron Weasley running across the grounds chasing after a huge black dog. We saw the dog drag him under the Whomping Willow, and, obviously, we were pretty curious, so we followed."

Harry and Hermione came to a stop outside a door, and Harry put his hand on the handle, catching Hermiones eyes. She was staring at him avidly, obviously wanting him to continue with his tale.

"Well?" she asked, not even realising they had come to a stop.

Harry chuckled. "One moment Hermione, we're here."

"Here?" Hermione looked like she had been confounded.

"Yeah," Harry said, pulling down on the handle and opening the door, "what do you think?" he asked, gesturing into the room.

Hermione followed his arm, looking into the immaculately clean room, and then being drawn down to the large blanket spread out on the floor, the picnic basket and the many candles scattered around the room, giving the romantic setting a golden glow. Hermiones mouth hung open and her eyes widened.

"Wow," she breathed.

"You like it?" Harry said, gesturing her inside.

"It's amazing," she said, walking in slowly. Harry followed and shut the door behind them. "You did all this for me?"

"Yeah," Harry said, "mostly. I cleaned the place up, but I didn't make the picnic. Dobby helped me with that."

"Dobby?" Hermione asked.

"Draco's old house-elf," Harry said, "he works at Hogwarts now. I set him free at the end of our second year, to spite Lucius Malfoy. Draco was pissed at me for weeks." He said the last part with a grin.

"You set a house-elf free?" Hermione gaped at him; admiration shining in her eyes, and something Harry couldn't quite place.

"Yeah," Harry said, smiling with bemusement.

He was shocked when he felt Hermione practically leap into his arms, wrapping her own around him tightly. "You are an amazing person Harry." She said in his ear, and when she pulled back, she was beaming at him.

"Oh-Kay," Harry said, still confused. What was the big deal? "What's the big deal?"

"You set a house-elf free!" Hermione said with enthusiasm. "I've been trying to come up with a way to better their situation for years. I think it's dreadful how they are treated, don't you?"

"Err..." Harry scratched his head. "Sure. I mean, yeah, it is pretty bad."

"It's awful!" Hermione said vigorously.

"Anyway," Harry said, "Dobby is a friend of mine. When I told him I was going to make a picnic, he offered to make it for me. There's really no stopping him when he puts his mind to something."

"He works at Hogwarts?" Hermione asked. "For free?"

"No," Harry said, "Dumbledore pays him."

"That's wonderful," Hermione beamed.

"Yeah," Harry motioned for her to take a seat on the blanket, "do you want to sit?"

"Sure," Hermione said, sitting down. Harry followed suit. "Will you thank him for me?"

"I'll do better," Harry promised, "I'll take you to the kitchens and you can thank him yourself."

"That would be wonderful," Hermione said, as Harry opened the picnic basket and started pulling out food.

There were meat pies, sandwiches of all kinds, fruit, and pastries, almost anything you would need for a great picnic. Harry piled up all the food on the blanket.

"So," Hermione broke the silence, "what happened after you followed Ron Weasley down the tunnel?"

"Oh," Harry said, still pulling food out of the basket, "well, we followed the tunnel and ended up here, and found Sirius attacking Weasley. Or at least that's what it looked like. Anyway, he wasn't, he was just trying to get at Weasley's rat, which turned out to be Pettigrew."

"Pettigrew?" Hermione gasped in surprise. "He was an Animagus! But wait, what about the dog?"

"I'm sure you can figure it out Hermione," Harry said, grinning at her.

She gasped again. "Sirius Black? He's an Animagus too?"

“Yeah,” Harry said, “he is. See, as you know, it turns out Sirius switched with Peter and became my parents Secret Keeper when they went into hiding. But Peter – or Wormtail, as I prefer to call him – was a spy for Voldemort. When Sirius found out what happened he went to kill Wormtail, but Wormtail killed a load of Muggles, shouted that Sirius betrayed my parents, and cut his own finger off before turning into a rat.”

“I see,” Hermione said, mulling everything over in her head. “Why do you call him Wormtail?” she finally asked.

“Well, that was his nickname,” Harry explained, “When he was younger, he was friends with my father, Sirius, and Remus Lupin. They were inseparable.”

“Professor Lupin?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, “they called themselves the Marauders and made this.” Harry pulled out the Marauders Map and showed it to Hermione. As she began examining it, Harry continued his explanation:

“I didn’t believe Sirius at first,” Harry said, “and probably would have killed him if Professor Lupin hadn’t shown up. He disarmed Draco and me and hugged Sirius. He’d figured it out, you see, because he had confiscated the Map from the Weasley twins earlier in the year and saw Pettigrew’s name on it. Together, they explained everything to Draco and me and even Ron Weasley. Then they turned his rat into Wormtail. They got a confession out of him and the little rat tried to beg forgiveness from me. Sirius wanted to kill him on the spot, and I was tempted, but Lupin said we should take him back to the castle and show him to Dumbledore.”

“Prove Sirius innocent.” Hermione said, still marvelling over the ingenious map.

“Precisely,” Harry said, “so we turned him back into a rat and Remus kept hold of him. But on our way back to the castle Snape came and immediately stunned Remus and Sirius, and in all the commotion, Wormtail escaped. I managed to convince Snape not to take Sirius and Remus straight to the Dementors and instead we went to Dumbledore. Dumbledore used Legilimency on myself, and saw what

had happened, and then they revived Sirius and did the same. We used the memories to prove Sirius innocent.”

“Wow,” was all Hermione could say to that.

“Yeah,” Harry said, “and what a bitch. Like I told you, Wormtail came back to bite me in the ass the next year when he helped restore Voldemort.”

“Right,” Hermione said. “But...” Hermione faltered.

“What is it?” Harry asked. “You can ask me anything Hermione.”

“It’s just,” Hermione began, “it’s been bugging me. I read a lot about Animagi, I know, surprise-surprise, Hermione read a book, but don’t you have to register. So wouldn’t the Ministry know Sirius and Peter where Animagi?”

“Not if they never registered,” Harry explained, “and they didn’t. Along with my father, they all became Animagi together so they could join Remus when he went wolfie during the full moon.”

“They did?” Hermione was surprised again. Harry couldn’t blame her, it was quite a tale, but he was proud of his Father, Godfather and friend’s accomplishments.

“Yeah,” Harry said, shrugging. “Never underestimate the bonds some people share. It can be a powerful thing.”

Hermione nodded her assent.

“You haven’t touched your food,” Harry pointed out, motioning to the untouched food before his girlfriend, “is something wrong?”

“No,” Hermione said, “it looks lovely. It’s just; you’ve been through so much. And I get the feeling things haven’t even started yet. It’s just a little scary.”

“If you want to back out,” Harry said, “I’ll understand. I’d be pissed, but I’d understand. I told you before Hermione and it won’t ever change. I understand how dangerous it is to be involved with me and

it's one of the things that make me want to keep us a secret, at least for now."

"I know," Hermione said, "but I don't want to not be with you. I've never felt like this...it's hard to put it into words. But I don't care about the danger, or the secrets. All I want is to be with you."

Hermione caught Harry's eyes over the blanket and found herself leaning forward. Harry watched as she came closer, smiling, and then leant forwards himself, meeting her halfway. Their lips touched tentatively, sharing their first kiss. Harry's hands came up to cup her face, enjoying the feel of her soft lips on his, and the touch of her heated skin under his fingers.

They continued to kiss well into the night, forgetting about everything else, and just drowning in each other.

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Fourteen

Things had only been getting better for Harry and Hermione since he had taken her to the Shrieking Shack. They spent a lot more time together, sharing tender kisses, and not so tender, passionate kisses. After their first kiss, Harry had continued to tell Hermione about his life. He told her about living with the Dursleys and then living with Sirius. He told her everything - everything but the prophecy.

That was one thing he was hesitating on telling her. Despite her assurances that she would be with him no matter what, Harry wasn't so sure she would stick around after he told her about his be or be killed situation. He was still going to tell her; of course, he was just waiting for the opportune moment.

So the days passed, turned into weeks, and Harry found himself sitting in the Slytherin locker rooms, waiting for the call to summon them onto the Quidditch Pitch. Draco was giving the team a last minute lecture, but Harry was hardly paying attention.

Crabbe and Goyle sat across from him, clutching their bats with their muscle-bound arms. The three Chasers sat next to Harry, staring with rapt attention at Draco as he went on and on about some new tactic. Draco was changing things up quite a bit for the Slytherin Quidditch team.

Normally, the Slytherin team employed a ground and pound style that wasn't all that impressive, but with Harry as Seeker, it got the job done. Just about. However, since Draco had been made captain, he had put more of emphasis on Skill. Crabbe and Goyle had returned to the team as the only part still the same, other than Harry, who was irreplaceable, and obviously, Draco, the new captain. The three new Chasers were the most impressive Slytherin had to offer, and the most impressive the team had seen in at least a decade.

The first new team member was Kristy Swithin, a lithe looking second year girl with short messy blonde hair. The second member was a foreign student named Albert Anselm, who was quite large for a Chaser, but was actually one of the fastest Harry had ever seen.

The third new member was the most interesting, as he was none other than Travis Grimsby, the suspected Death Eater behind the recent attack on the Gryffindor Katie Bell. Grimsby was sitting at the far end of the room, looking surly. Harry cast his eyes down the row at the older boy, wondering if his fellow teammate was secretly a Death Eater. He had tried to sneak a peak at the boys arm when he was changing, but he suspiciously kept it out of sight, only fuelling Harry's belief that he was Voldemorts new recruit.

"Right then," Draco sat, clapping Harry on the shoulder to get his attention, "time to go kick some Gryffindor arse."

"Yah!" Albert Anselm roared with his rough English.

Draco shook his head, but led the team out onto the field, Harry right next to him. The roar of the crowd was deafening, and as usual, the crowd was in heavy support of the red and gold Gryffindors. Harry didn't care; he just straddled his Firebolt and waited. Draco clashed his fist with Harry's shoulder as he passed and Harry smirked at him in return.

Harry felt himself go into the zone, tuning out everything else. He dimly heard the whistle blow and then he was off, shooting into the sky as a green and silver blur. He came to a stop high above the field, his eyes already searching for the tiny golden Snitch that would end the game.

(--)

Draco had given the best rousing speech he could muster; internally laughing when he noticed Harry wasn't listening. Typical. Then he'd led the team onto the field to a rousing chorus of boos. Draco tapped Harry on the shoulder as he passed, before coming to a stop before Madam Hooch, the referee.

Draco looked around, assessing his opponents. The new Gryffindor players looked nervous, which was only good for his team. Draco noticed Ginny Weasley eyeing him coolly and he winked and blew her a kiss. She flushed and turned away from him.

Draco had just shouldered his broom when Madam Hooch got his attention, and he turned to come face to face with Ron Weasley, the Gryffindor Captain. Weasley narrowed his eyes at him and Draco had to wonder if he'd seen the interaction between himself and his sister. Either way, Draco didn't care; he just smirked at the Weasel.

"Ready to lose Weasel?" Draco taunted.

"Screw you Malfoy," Weasley shot back, "you're the one that's going to lose."

"Boys," Madam Hooch warned. She put her whistle in her mouth, and then signalled for them to shake hands. Draco offered his first, and Weasley took it regretfully. They shook roughly and then separated, each mounting their brooms. Madam Hooch blew her whistle and the game began.

Draco rose into the air and took his position at the goals quickly. He scanned the field, spotting Harry already searching for the Snitch. His eyes then sought out the rest of his team, but ended up landing on the other Weasley, the even less pleasant one that was currently his target. Ginny had somehow got possession of the Quaffle already, and she was streaking towards him, dodging Bludgers and bodies as she went. Draco hardly had time to think before she shot, and had even less time to attempt a save but he did. His fingers brushed the Quaffle, but the ball ended up going through the hoops anyway and he cursed.

"Ooh, ten to nothing already," an annoying voice called out the commentary, "Gryffindor in the lead!"

Ginny rounded out her broom and smirked at him, blowing him a mock kiss. Draco only smirked back and pretended to catch the kiss. Ginny shook her head and took off down the pitch again.

When she next came at him, holding the Quaffle under her arm and with fire in her eyes, Draco managed to save the shot, and took great pleasure in flirting with the upset Gryffindor. But the match had only just begun, and it would only be the second of many similar encounters during the game. It was a battle of wills and skill, with Ginny trying to prove she was better than him, and Draco trying to

prove the same. In fact, they almost forgot about the entire game all together, too caught up in their own little one.

(--)

Meanwhile, overhead, Harry had spotted the Snitch. He shot towards it at great speed and was soon joined by Ron Weasley, the opposing Seeker. Ron was only on a Cleansweep though, and Harry had significant advantage. Unfortunately, a well-placed Bludger by Katie Bells replacement, Dean Thomas, distracted both Harry and Ron long enough for them to lose sight of the Snitch.

"You won't get this one Potter!" Ron shouted at him. "I can't prove you killed my dad, but I'm damn sure going to prove I'm a better Seeker than you!"

Harry ignored him, taking to the high field again, beginning his search anew. He was diverted when he spotted Hermione below him, sitting with her friend Neville, and wearing a red and gold scarf. He was a little angry with that, he had to admit, but what should he have expected? She was a Gryffindor. Though, it would have been nice to see her supporting him, her boyfriend.

Shaking his head, Harry banished those thoughts. They would only distract him. He needed to concentrate on the game, not his extremely pretty girlfriend. He smiled at his own thoughts and then began scanning the pitch again. Dodging a stray Bludger, he swerved around and flew down, scanning the grass. He was sure he saw a flash of gold. Then it came again, and he saw it clearly this time, hovering near a particularly long patch of grass, which almost obscured it from view. He quickly dove for it.

"The score is sixty to forty in favour of Gryffindor!" the commentator called. "This match is extremely close and I think it's going to come down to whoever catches the Snitch first! Speaking of which, it seems Potter has seen something! Yes! He has! It's the Snitch! And Weasley is on his tail!"

Harry spun to avoid a Bludger aimed his way by one of the new Gryffindor Beaters and stuck his hand out, using the other for balance. Weasley came down right in front of him, and he had to swerve to

avoid a collision, almost losing sight of the Snitch. Harry's eyes widened when he saw Ron reach out to snatch the Snitch, so he quickly swerved back in and forced Weasley to the side, out of the way of the Snitch, which was now shooting up into the air. They were neck and neck now, racing towards the tiny golden ball, and then WHAM!

A Bludger struck Weasley just as he was reaching for the Snitch, sending him tumbling from his broom. Harry snatched the Snitch and spun his broom around, whipping out his wand.

"Slytherin wins!" the commentator boomed, but most of the crowd had gone deathly silent, except for the Slytherins, as Ron's body hurtled towards the ground.

Wingardium Leviosa! Harry cast the Levitation Charm and Ron came to a stop with a jerk, just inches from the floor. Harry slowly set him down as the crowd let out a sigh of relief. Harry came to a stop and hopped off his broom, landing beside his Gryffindor 'rival'.

Ginny Weasley came flying down and dropped to her knees beside her brother, hugging him close. She looked up at Harry with tears in her eyes and mouthed a 'thank you'. Harry just shrugged and started to walk towards the celebrating Slytherins as the rest of the Gryffindors rushed down onto the pitch to see if Ron was okay.

He stopped when Hermione caught his eye and gave him a secret smile, and he couldn't help but give her one back. Neville looked with confusion between the two, being the only one to spot the exchanged smiles. Harry saw him start interrogating Hermione before he strode away.

Harry joined Draco and the rest of the Slytherins, who instantly drew him into a group hug. Harry shrugged them off irritably and started back towards the changing rooms. Draco caught up to him.

"Nice catch Harry," he said, in greeting, "but why'd you save the Weasel. It'd been funny to see him hit the ground." And Draco guffawed with laughter.

Harry chuckled, knowing Draco was only kidding. "Yeah," Harry dismissed the comment, "whatever you say Malfoy."

"You okay?" Draco asked.

"Yeah," Harry sighed, "I guess I'm just stressed about this whole student Death Eater business. I'm sure it's Grimsby - I just can't prove it. Did you see how careful he was about not showing anyone his arm?"

"Yeah," Draco agreed, "talk about suspicious."

"I'm going to start learning Legilimency," Harry said, as if he'd just thought of the idea, though it had actually been festering in the back of his mind for a while now, "as well as Occlumency. I want to know that goes on in his head."

They had reached the changing rooms, leaving the crowd behind.

"Count me in," Draco said, "Legilimency sounds like a nice little skill. Plus, I kind of already know the basics."

Harry rounded on him. "What?"

"Yeah," Draco shrugged sheepishly, "my father told me a bit about it and said I might try learning it. And when I met my Aunt Bellatrix last year after she and the rest of those Death Eaters broke out of Azkaban, she told me a bit about it and even gave me a impromptu lesson."

"And you didn't tell me this because?"

Draco shrugged again. "I didn't think it was important. I figured, you had your plate full with learning Occlumency and everything else, and you didn't seem interested in the Legilimency bit, so...?"

"Right," Harry ran a hand through his hair, "well, we'll start tonight, okay?"

"Fine by me."

(--)

As the Gryffindors bore the unconscious Ron up to the Hospital Wing, Ginny Weasley followed, looking worried. The Bludger that hit Ron had almost cracked his skull open, and if it wasn't for Harry Potter, Ron would probably be seriously injured, if not dead.

Ginny, like a lot of girls at Hogwarts, had always viewed Harry Potter with an air of ignorance, until she met him, that is. She, like most girls her age, hero-worshipped him. She had believed he was a Hero and a great wizard, after growing up hearing all about the Boy Who Lived. But then she had come to Hogwarts, and when she saw Harry for the first time, withdrawn, mysterious, and as she learnt in her first year, a Parsletongue, she quickly changed her opinion.

Everyone in the wizarding world viewed Harry with anxiousness, as if waiting for him to suddenly go berserk and slaughter innocent. She had heard many a tale about how Potter resembled the young He Who Must Not Be Named - both with power beyond their years, both mature beyond their years, both Parsletongue, the list goes on and on.

However, at the end of her first year she saw Harry in a different light all together, when he and Draco Malfoy came into the Chamber of Secrets and rescued her from the young You Know Who. She could hardly remember what really happened, her mind having blurred it all together in one horrible nightmare, but she had been told.

She dimly remembered Harry battling a large snake and how he had destroyed the Riddle Diary with the snake's tooth. She remembered soft arms around her, holding her tight. She remembered a Hero saving her life.

From that day on, Ginny didn't put too much stock in what people said about Harry Potter. Sure, he was a little mysterious and sometimes he could be pretty scary, with his aloof nature, as if he didn't have a care in the world, like he wouldn't care if the world suddenly exploded, but Ginny knew differently. She knew that when push came to shove he would stand up and fight for the right side. So what if he was in Slytherin? He proved himself to her when he

rescued her from Riddle and he had once again done it earlier that day when he saved her brother from his life-threatening fall.

Ginny watched the rest of the Gryffindor Quidditch team set their captain on the Hospital Bed as Madam Pomfrey started blustering around, angrily demanding everyone leave her Hospital Wing and patient alone. Ginny hung around longer than everyone else, watching as Madam Pomfrey worked. When the old witch stopped and turned to give her a reassuring smile, telling her simply that her brother would be fine, only then did Ginny leave the hospital wing with a relieved sigh.

She came to a stop just outside the double doors, staring at Draco Malfoy, who was leaning against the wall and smirking that sexy smirk at her. She felt her anger rising and started to storm away. He followed.

"Hey Weasley," Draco drawled, "What's the rush?"

"Leave me alone Malfoy," Ginny said through her nose, as Draco jumped in front of her, "I am really not in the mood for you!"

"Well we don't have to talk." Draco quipped, wagging his eyebrows.

"Screw you, you pig!" Ginny snapped.

"Took the words right out of my mouth," Draco shot back, grinning.

Before Ginny even contemplated what she was doing, she pulled back her hand, ready to slap the taste out of his mouth, but he caught her hand and pulled her closer. Ginny squirmed in his grip until he kissed her. She felt his tongue try to force its way into her mouth, and, with heat and anger rising, she lifted her knee up into his groin. Draco gasped and fell backwards onto the floor, clutching his manhood. Ginny balled her fists at her side as he lay on the floor at her feet, his eyes now narrowed to dangerous slits.

"I would never, *ever*, go out with someone as vile, as *disgusting*, as you!" Ginny declared, practically snarling.

Draco glared back up at her.

"You're a pig!" Ginny said, breath coming in ragged gasps. "Nothing but a disgusting pig. If you ever bother me again, I will Hex what's left of your balls to a million pieces, got it?" She shouted the last part, before storming past Draco, leaving him on the floor, holding his bruised manhood.

(--)

Blaise was laughing, tears of mirth in his eyes, pointing at a red faced Draco Malfoy, who sat nursing his balls and his pride in one of the many chairs in the Slytherin common room. The few remaining Slytherins in the room kept glancing at Blaise as if he was crazy, but the boy kept on laughing; now clutching his sides.

"She...she...kicked you..." and he was off again, unable to get any more words out.

"Shut your mouth Zabini," Draco snapped, his face flushing his normally pale face with colour, "you look like a hyena."

"And you..." Blaise chuckled, gasping. "You really thought that stupid Gryffindor would ever open up to you that way, damn your stupid. This has got to be the most entertaining bet I've ever made. I can't believe you. Keep it up Malfoy and I'll die of laughter."

"Yeah," Draco snarled, "mainly because if you don't shut up I'll kill you myself!"

That set Blaise off with another round of raucous laughter. Draco just shook his head and went back to nursing his injured pride. He'd been made to look like a fool, and that was one thing he hated more than anything else. It reminded him all too much of how his father treated him. No, things were going to change.

It was personal now, Ginny wasn't just some bet anymore, it was personal. She had humiliated him. Draco grinned. He was going to humiliate her, and he wouldn't hold back, not one bit. It was time for a different tactic.

(--)

Hermione found Harry sitting alone at their table at the back of the library, and quickly claimed the seat next to his, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek in greeting. He grinned at her in response.

“Hey,” Harry said.

“Hi,” Hermione returned, “congratulations on the win. You were amazing. I’ve never been to a Quidditch match before, well, expect for the first one during first year. I didn’t like it. But you looked great.”

“Thanks,” Harry said, genuinely touched that she had come to the game to watch him. His earlier thoughts proved false, Harry realised Hermione had been at the game to support him after all, just not openly.

“I thought you’d be celebrating,” Hermione observed, “how come you aren’t?”

“Oh,” Harry shrugged, “celebrating isn’t my thing. It draws me into the spotlight and I don’t like that. I have enough of that being the Boy Who Lived.” He said the last bit with great distaste. “The only reason I play is because I love flying. Otherwise...”

“Right,” Hermione nodded, “I understand. Look, I’m just going to say this, because I really don’t know how to bring it up. Remember when I asked you if I could tell my friend about you?”

“I figured you’d ask me this,” Harry said, sitting up straighter in his chair and turning to face his girlfriend, “he saw our little exchange and started interrogating you about it huh?”

“Yeah,” Hermione admitted, “I didn’t tell him anything. But I want to tell Harry. I promise you, he won’t tell anyone. Please?” Hermione batted her eyelashes at Harry and he laughed.

“Trying to woo me with your good looks?” Harry asked playfully.

“Is it working?” Hermione returned ruefully.

Harry grinned. “Okay,” he sighed, “I guess you can tell him. But he has to promise not to tell anyone about us.”

"Oh thank you!" Hermione gave him a tight hug. "Thank you Harry." She said in his ear. "I promise you Harry, he won't tell a soul. Thank you."

"Anything for you Hermione," Harry replied.

She pulled back and smiled at him, resting her forehead on his own. "You're the greatest."

"Ditto."

Hermione laughed and pulled back. "Do you want to meet him?"

"Your friend?"

"Yeah," Hermione said, "I'm sure you'll get along, and having you as a friend might really help him. He has confidence issues."

"Neville Longbottom, right?" Harry asked.

"Yeah," Hermione nodded.

Harry looked thoughtful, seconds turned into minutes, and Hermione was going to give him a nudge to remind him she was there when he looked up and caught her eye. She saw resolve again in his eyes.

"Okay," Harry said, "if he wants too he can come study with us sometimes."

"Thank you Harry," Hermione said, kissing him on the lips chastely.

"No problem."

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Fifteen

Draco spent the next week planning. He was determined to fulfil the bet and humiliate the little Weasel before the entire school. But to do that, he had to reset things. He had to make Ginny Weasley believe in him. He understood that now. Ginny would never open up to Draco, but maybe she'd open up to a different Draco. So Draco waited, letting the red headed firecracker cool off, before he finally put his plan into motion.

Draco found Ginny sitting outside in the courtyard, nestling an open book on her lap and chewing on her quill, frowning down at the book. Draco watched her for a few moments, as her hair blew in the light wind like wild fiery tendrils of flame. Taking a breath and hardening himself to the task, he started forwards.

As his shadow descended over her book, Ginny looked up, her pretty face instantly changing into a fierce look of anger, her brown eyes narrowed.

"Woah," Draco said, holding his hands in a sign of surrender, "calm down. I'm not here to bug you. I just wanted...well, could we talk?" Draco played up his nervousness, hoping it would appease her somewhat.

"Talk?" Ginny asked, her eyes narrowing further with suspicion. "About what?"

"Us." Draco said.

"There is no us Malfoy," Ginny countered, looking down at her book, dismissing him.

"Yeah," Draco said, running a hand through his sleek hair, "but listen, I just want a word, and that's it."

"How about 'go away'?" Ginny asked snidely, not even bothering to look up from her book. "Oh darn, that's two."

Draco smiled, unable to help himself. She was definitely a spirited one.

“Funny,” he said, “but I’m serious. Would you look at me?” He demanded, putting his hand over the page so she couldn’t pretend to read.

“Piss off Malfoy!” Ginny snarled, yanking her book away from him.

This drew the attention of the rest of the students milling about the courtyard, who turned to watch the spectacle. Whispers erupted as to why Draco Malfoy was talking to Ginny Weasley, but Draco ignored them.

“Can we talk privately?” he whispered, bending his head down to be closer to her so she could hear him.

“Ugh,” Ginny grunted, getting up and slamming her book shut, sticking her quill in her pocket, “you are the most annoying prat I’ve ever met, even more than Ron!”

Then she grabbed him by the arm and hauled him away from the crowd, around the corner. She let him go, and Draco rubbed at his arm where she had grabbed him none too gently, as she looked around to check for eavesdroppers. Turned her head back to glare at him, she demanded:

“Well?”

“I’m sorry,” Draco said, plunging head long into his plan, lowering his eyes for effect.

“You’re...what?” Ginny blundered, clearly taken aback.

“I’m sorry,” Draco whispered, “I’m sorry that I upset you. I just...I thought that you might be interested, but I guess...anyway, I won’t bother you again. I just wanted to tell you that. And that I’m sorry.”

Draco shrugged, lowering his head even further and burying his hands in his pockets. Ginny was staring at him with her mouth ajar. Finally getting control of herself, she snapped her mouth shut and looked at him ponderingly.

“Really?”

“Really.” Draco returned. “I promise.”

“I...Okay, thank you.” Ginny said, still in shock.

When Draco looked up, he saw her fiddling with the quill again, before sticking it in her mouth, shrugging, and walking away with a casual wave. He smiled, which soon turned into a smirk. Oh yeah, he was good.

Part One of plan to humiliate Ginny Weasley was a success. Proceed to Part Two.

(--)

As promised, Harry was waiting for Hermione in the library. Today was the day he would meet Hermiones friend Neville Longbottom, the almost Boy Who Lived. Or would he have lived? Who knows, either way, this little meeting was going to be interesting.

Ever since Hermione had mentioned wanting to introduce him to Neville, Harry had been curious. He had started to ponder the Longbottom kid, and thoughts and theories eventually followed. He could be a powerful ally. After all, the prophecy was made about the child born at the end of July, meaning either himself or Neville Longbottom. Only Voldemort had chosen Harry, and not Neville, but still, one has to wonder. Both boys should have the ability to defeat Voldemort inside them, seeing as the prophecy was made about them, or at least that's how Harry saw it, so both he and Neville had to have the power in them.

But from what he had heard and learnt about Longbottom, he apparently was a clueless wizard; some even said he was almost a Squib. Harry couldn't believe that. Neville had to have the power in him. So what was blocking it? Whatever it was, Harry was determined to find it. Harry liked the idea of having Neville watch his back, even though he hadn't even met the kid yet.

Harry also knew that Neville's parents were in St. Mungo's, terminally insane due to being tortured with the Cruciatus Curse following Voldemort's first downfall. That had to give Neville some desire for revenge.

Before any further musing could be done, Hermione appeared, followed by a timid looking chubby boy. Neville Longbottom definitely didn't look like the formidable type, but Harry could see it in him, just looking at him. A little exercise (something most wizards disregarded completely) and training and he would be a prime fighter for Harry's side.

Hermione beamed at him as she approached him, stopping by his chair and leaning down to kiss his cheek. Harry looked past her to see Neville regarding him with curiosity and suspicion. That was good, at least he was cautious.

"Neville," Hermione said, turning to face her friend, "this is Harry. Harry, this is Neville Longbottom."

"Hey Neville," Harry said.

"Hi." Neville returned quietly.

"Why don't you sit down," Hermione said, "and ah...I'll go see if I can find that book you wanted. You two talk, I'll be right back."

And then she bailed, practically running behind one the stacks. Harry smiled, knowing what she was up to. Deciding not to disappoint his girlfriend, he turned to face her friend and held out his hand, across the table. Neville regarded it curiously for a moment, and then shook it, a little stiffly.

"So," Harry began, but Neville interrupted him:

"What are you playing at?" Neville asked, trying valiantly to hide how terrified of confronting Harry he was, but determined to do so. Got to admire those brave Gryffindors.

Harry laughed. "I'm not playing at anything," Harry said, "but I admire your courage and value your loyalty to Hermione. She's a great witch, and she deserves more than what she has. True friends, like you."

"And you?" Neville asked. "What do you get out of this? I don't understand it. You can have anyone you want. Why Hermione? Is this some sort of game, are you planning on hurting her?" Neville took

a huge breath after his rant, and Harry noticed his rather large meaty fists clenched on the table between them.

“Hey,” Harry said, his hands up in surrender, “I swear to you, I’m not going to hurt Hermione. Do you think she’s not good enough for me?”

Neville stared at Harry, and then took a deep breath. “I don’t think you’re good enough for her.”

Harry laughed again.

“Stop laughing at me!” Neville shouted, standing up abruptly.

“Woah,” Harry stood as well, hands up again, “calm down. I’m not laughing at you. I just think it’s funny, that’s all. Not many people would stand up to me, but you do, because of Hermione - for Hermione. I respect that. I respect you for that. She does that to people. It’s one of the things I love about her.”

Neville continued to regard him with suspicion.

“Look,” Harry said, “I happen to agree with you. I don’t deserve Hermione, but it’s not up to me. It’s not up to you, either. It’s her choice. And until she tells me to piss off, I’m going to be with her. So you have to accept it or risk losing her friendship. I understand if you don’t trust me. I’m okay with it, but I’d like you to give me a chance. I know what people say about me. Give me a chance to prove them wrong.”

“Why should I?” Neville asked.

“Because Hermione did,” Harry said, “and the cleverest witch in Hogwarts believes in me and trusts me. You’d be an idiot to overlook that fact.”

“Erm,” Hermione was back, standing at the mouth of aisle of books and holding one close to her chest, staring at them nervously, “is something wrong?”

“No,” Harry said, sitting down again, “everything’s fine. Isn’t that right Neville?”

“...” Neville looked at Hermione, and then back to Harry, before looking at Hermione again. “Yeah, everything’s fine. We we’re just...talking.”

“Okay.” Hermione said, crossing to them and taking a seat beside Harry, though Harry knew she didn’t believe them. He would explain to her later. For now, he had to continue to try and steer Neville’s distrust for him down a nicer path, one hopefully leading to a safer relationship of trust - a relationship of two people with the same goals.

(--)

Draco let things lie for a week or so before he put phase two of his plan into action. Saturday morning saw Draco rising early, meeting Harry as he too climbed out of his bed at almost the exact same time. Draco bid him a good morning as he passed to the bathroom, and when he emerged half an hour later, fresh and clean from his shower, he found Harry sitting downstairs in the empty Slytherin common room. Draco took a seat near him.

“Hey Harry,” Draco greeted his friend again.

“Morning,” Harry returned.

“Do me a favour?” Draco asked, getting right to the point.

Harry lowered the book he was reading and peered at Draco suspiciously. “What?”

“Lend me your Invisibility Cloak?” Draco clarified, giving Harry his best grin.

Harry laughed. “What for?”

“Just got something to do....” Draco said, not wanting to get into details with his best friend at this point. He knew Harry wouldn’t be too thrilled about him using his Cloak to ultimately get his own back and humiliate a girl.

Harry narrowed his eyes, but apparently decided to let Draco off for the time being. “Fine,” Harry said, “but don’t lose it or damage it, or I’ll

have your head, got it?" Harry grin made the threat playful and Draco laughed, nodding.

"You got it." He said.

Draco retrieved the Cloak from Harry and then left the common room. It took him a long time to find Ginny, but he eventually did, just as the sun was reaching its peak. He spotted the familiar red hair through the crowd in the entrance hall and quickly ducked into an alcove out of view.

He saw her talking to a girl with long dirty coloured blonde hair. Ginny said something to the girl and she nodded before walking away, leaving Ginny standing at the mouth of the corridor leading to the west tower. Judging by the letter clutched in her hand, Draco figured she was heading for the Owlery at the top of the west tower. He grinned and quickly took one of the shortcuts he and Harry knew, putting his plan into motion.

(--)

"Yeah, I agree," Ginny was saying, talking to the girl with the blonde hair – Luna Lovegood, "but listen, I really have to send this letter first, and then I'll come and meet you in the Great Hall and we can look it up together, okay?"

"Okay," Luna agreed, nodding her head a little, "I'll wait for you."

"See ya," Ginny called, as Luna turned and began to walk away. Luna turned and started walking backwards, giving Ginny a tiny wave as she went, before she turned again and disappeared into the Great Hall.

Ginny then looked down at the letter in her hand, addressed to her mother, and then set off for the west tower and the Owlery. She had asked Ron if she could borrow his owl Cannonball, and he had agreed reluctantly, as was usual for her Brother. He didn't like anyone messing with his pets, after the mess with his last one, a rat named Scabbers that turned out be a wizard Animagus called Peter Pettigrew.

After their mother bought him Cannonball from a friend who lived over in America, Ron had become over protective towards his pet. Cannonball was a rather large grey coloured Great Horned Owl. Ginny wanted to call him Pigwidgeon, but Ron steadfastly refused her. She tried using the name around the owl, hoping he would like the name, but she had no such luck. Every time she called Cannonball Pigwidgeon he just turned his golden eyes her way and glared. In the end, she just gave up and agreed to whatever Ron decided, which was Cannonball, after his favourite Quidditch team the Chudley Cannons.

Ginny was making her way up west tower when she heard the sobbing. She came to a stop, listening. It came again, great wracking sobs coming from the Owlery. Was someone up there? Obviously, but why were they crying? Ginny was going to turn around and come back later, she didn't want to intrude, but her curiosity got the better of her and she started to creep up the stony steps.

Ginny came to a quiet stop at the door and eased it open slightly, peering in. What she saw shocked her beyond belief. Draco Malfoy was hunched over, sitting on the floor, holding a crumpled up letter and bawling his eyes out. It looked like he was trying not to cry, or at least not to make a sound, as his body was shaking from the unreleased tears. But he wasn't doing a very good job, and tears leaked down his pale face. He looked a mess.

Ginny didn't know what to do. After all, it was Draco Malfoy. What would he do if she revealed herself to him? Would he hurt her? She wasn't sure. But why was he crying? Ginny was desperate to know and once again her curiosity got the better of her. She slowly eased open the door and stepped into the room. The wind hit her face and she gasped when the door slammed behind her with great force, startling herself and Malfoy.

Malfoy jumped to his feet, staring at her in shock, his eyes rimmed red from the tears. His eyes narrowed, but then he just lowered his head and started to walk towards her sedately, and Ginny realised what he was doing. He was going to leave. Seeing the normally cocky Malfoy being so meek scared her. Was he leaving because of her, because of what she had said to him? Did he think he had to

leave the room for her? Would he really do that? She wanted to say no, that wasn't Malfoy, but to be honest, she really didn't know what was Malfoy now. He had changed so much over the last few weeks - she had trouble keeping up.

But Ginny knew that she couldn't let him leave, so she reached out and grabbed his arm gently. His head rose quickly and his eyes met hers, his wide with shock. She tried to smile reassuringly, but wasn't sure how it came off. Instead, she just directed him back to his sitting position and gently sat him down, before joining him.

Silence fell over the two Hogwarts students, broken only by the howling wind up high in the west tower. When Ginny turned to regard him, he was staring at his hands resting on his bent knees, and the letter crumpled up within them.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

Malfoy just shook his head, turning his face away from her; obviously ashamed she had found him in a weak moment. She was surprised; she didn't think he had weak moments. He was human after all.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Ginny continued to press him.

"It's stupid," Malfoy mumbled.

"It doesn't matter," Ginny said, "sometimes stupid stuff bothers us. It isn't a weakness. It's just what makes us human. You can talk to me if you want, I promise I won't tell anyone."

"It's just..." Malfoy turned his head to face her again, then moved a hand over his face, wiping away tears, "my father. He's very strict. If I don't do well in school, he..."

Ginny was silent, letting him gather his courage.

"He...have you ever been hit with a Cruciatus Curse?" Malfoy asked, and Ginny couldn't stop herself from gasping. Was he saying his father used the Cruciatus Curse on him?

"No," Ginny said, her eyes wide, "but...are you saying?"

"Trust me," Draco laughed numbly, and Ginny hated the sound of it, "it isn't pleasant."

"I'm so sorry," Ginny murmured - and she was.

"Yeah," Draco said. "Me too. Anyway, if I don't get good grades, meaning, if I don't do better than all the Mudblo...Muggleborn's. Well, he doesn't like that. I'm supposed to uphold the honour and respect of the Malfoy name; not make a mockery of it, that's what he says. It's stupid. The Malfoy name doesn't have any honour left too it, not with most people. The only people who respect my father are the people he pays to respect him. It'd ridiculous."

Ginny couldn't help but smile, though it was a little sadly. "I didn't know," Ginny said.

"Didn't know?"

"I didn't know you felt that way," Ginny clarified, "I thought...oh I'm so stupid. I thought you were just like him. But you're not, are you? You're different. You don't follow his rules. You're Harry's friend/Harry's friend."

"Yeah," Draco said, meeting her eyes, "I am Harry's friend. That makes a difference to you?"

"Of course it does," Ginny said, "Harry's a hero. I don't believe what everyone else believes about him. Sure, he's a little creepy at times, all silent like, but he isn't a bad person. I never understood why he was friends with you, but I do now."

"Why do you believe in Harry?" Draco asked with interest in his eyes.

"Because he saved me in the Chamber of Secrets," Ginny said.

Draco was silent for a while, and then he smiled, for the first time since she had found him crying.

"We both did," Draco said, "remember? I was there too. When Harry was fighting the Basilisk, I was by your side, holding you. Don't you remember?"

“Oh...” Ginny’s eyes widened and her mouth dropped open, before she laughed and covered her eyes with her hand. “I don’t really remember much, but I remember, or at least I thought I remembered Harry putting his arms around me. But it wasn’t Harry,” Ginny removed her hand, staring into Draco’s eyes, “it was you.”

“Surprise,” Draco mumbled.

Ginny laughed. “I’m sorry,” Ginny said, “I shouldn’t be laughing. You’re upset...”

“Not anymore,” Draco whispered, then spoke up, “not since you sat down with me.”

Ginny smiled. “I’m glad I could help.”

“I’m glad you wanted too.” And he smiled at her and Ginny felt her heart jump in her chest, butterflies exploding. What just happened?

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Sixteen

December arrived, bringing with it more harsh weather. It was unlikely to see any Hogwarts student out and about without a large cloak and scarf wrapped around them. The cold even permeated into the castle, giving it a chill atmosphere, and students often found themselves shivering with the cold.

Harry and Hermione continued their study dates, with Neville tagging along occasionally. Whenever he did, Harry always found himself under heavy scrutiny. Neville seemed to watch him like a hawk, but Harry didn't mind. As long as the boy eventually realised he wasn't a threat, he was willing to suffer his attentions. Hermione watched the two with a frown, but didn't say anything.

Harry had taken her aside after his first encounter with her best friend, as he had planned, and told her what had transpired between them, and of Neville's fears. He asked her not to interfere, and to let the Gryffindor learn to trust him on his own, and Hermione had grudgingly agreed.

Currently, the trio was sitting in their usual seats at the back of Hogwarts Library, Hermione sitting next to Harry and Neville across from them. As was expected in the December chill, they had bundled up in thick cloaks and Hermione was wearing a scarf.

Hermione shivered, clutched her cloak tighter around herself as she continued to read from the textbook before her. "Grr, it's so cold," she shivered out.

Harry reached out his hand and started to rub soothing circles into her back and shoulder, in a pretty vain attempt to warm her up. Hermione smiled neither the less. Neville just glowered at him.

It wasn't the first time that Harry had suspected it, but he was almost sure of it now. Neville definitely had a crush on Hermione. It was expected he would be a bit weary of Harry, but after spending a month in his company, Neville should have warmed up to him at least a bit. But it seemed that wasn't the case. The only reason Harry could see was that the other boy saw Harry as someone moving in on his territory.

Harry doubted Hermione was aware of this, and he definitely wanted to keep it that way. There was no telling how she would react to finding out Neville had feelings for her, and that that was the supreme source to his mistrust of Harry, but Harry was pretty sure it wouldn't be kindly. He didn't want to ruin their friendship over something stupid like that. Harry was sure that Neville's feelings were a result of him spending all of his life at Hogwarts with Hermione. It wasn't real, only an illusion he had fallen into, and Harry just need to show the boy.

"I think we better get going," Neville said, beginning to pack up his belongings.

"What?" Hermione said, looking at the watch on her wrist, frowning. "It's not that late."

"I just don't want to be caught going back to Gryffindor tower too late," Neville argued.

Harry thought it was a pretty lame argument, seeing as they had more than an hour left before curfew, and even so, it was pretty easy to avoid being seen when you had the Marauders Map and an Invisibility Cloak. Even so, Harry understood what Neville was trying to do.

"Come on Hermione," Neville went on.

"I'm going to stay a bit longer," Hermione answered, "you can go ahead if you want."

"But..." Neville had blocked himself in a corner now.

"Sit down Neville," Harry said, kicking out the other boy's chair from under the table, "we still have plenty of time."

Neville glared at him and grabbed his bag. "I'm going then," he said, still glaring at Harry. "Bye." And he took off.

Harry sighed. "Sorry Hermione," Harry said.

"Don't be," Hermione said back, echoing his sigh, "it's not your fault. Why is he being so difficult? Can't he see how nice you are?"

Harry was tempted to tell her, but held back. "I don't know," Harry said, "maybe I can find some alone time with him soon, talk to him one on one."

"Yeah," Hermione mumbled, "maybe."

"Anyway," Harry sat up in his chair, ruffling her hair playfully with the hand that previously been stroking her back, "let's not dwell."

"Hey!" Hermione batted his hand away, scowling good-naturedly at him, her hair now in disarray. "Aw, I bet I look like a hedgehog now."

"A cute hedgehog," Harry returned, leaning forward and capturing her lips with his own. Hermione made a soft mumbling retort against his lips, but then only deepened the kiss.

When they pulled back, Hermione lent her forehead against his. "I'm going to miss you over Christmas holidays," she said, absently taking his hand in her own.

"Me too," Harry said, squeezing her hand. He looked down at their clasped hands, and then met her eyes again. "Hey, listen, I have something I want to show you. It's really private and I've only ever shown it to one person. Interested?"

"What is it?" Hermione asked, grinning at his own grin.

"It's a secret," Harry said, "one that I want to show you."

"Okay."

"Then meet me in the Entrance Hall just outside the dungeons tomorrow night when we normally have our study dates, okay?"

"Okay," Hermione agreed, "but what are you going to show me?"

"I told you," Harry said, "It's a secret. You'll see tomorrow."

"Meanie," Hermione stuck her tongue out at him, shrieking out when he tried to jokingly bite it, and then losing all train of thought as they got lost in another passionate kiss.

(--)

While Harry spent the entire next day planning, Hermione spent it wondering what he was going to show her. She assumed it was something at Hogwarts, something only he knew about. Maybe a secret on that Map he has? Even though she couldn't be certain, she spent the entire day making up extravagant ideas of what Harry's secret was, and by the time she was standing outside the dungeons, she was about ready to burst from excitement and anticipation.

As the clock in the entrance hall chimed for seven o'clock, Hermione started hopping on the spot, craning her neck for any sign of Harry. It was probably pointless to look, as Harry most likely had his cloak on, but Hermione couldn't help herself. She cast her eyes to the clock again, watching as the hands ticked away to show five minutes past seven. He was late, did he forget? A thousand and one thoughts like this flittered through Hermione's mind in just a matter of seconds.

A hand closing down on her shoulder made her jump, and Hermione turned her intense chocolate brown eyes on the assailant. No one was there, but she could still feel the hand on her shoulder. It was Harry.

"Someone should put a bell on you," she said, offhandedly, speaking to think air.

She heard Harry chuckle.

"So I've been told," he said, and then she felt his hand clasp hers, "come on, this way."

"Do you always travel with that thing on?" Hermione asked, as he dragged her along, down the stone steps and into the dungeons.

"Mostly," Harry answered, "but I don't usually wear it all the time. But I definitely always have it with me. What can I say? I like my privacy."

"Anti-social," Hermione fake coughed.

"Says you," Harry shot back.

“Hey,” Hermione said, “at least I admit it. And it’s not like I don’t try...or I used to try. You’re just socially inept.”

“I prefer my wording,” Harry countered, leading her further into the dank dungeons.

Hermione smiled, enjoying the banter between them. She had never been the most confident person, or the most adept at talking to people, at least not since the Troll incident, but with Harry, she felt free. She could be herself. Sure, at first she was a bit weary, but Harry had a way of making you open up, whether you wanted to or not. It was funny really, how different Harry was to what people believed of him. But he didn’t seem to care that most of the wizarding world regarded him with trepidation. In fact, she wasn’t even sure he knew.

She supposed that was a little bit cold of him, the way he didn’t seem to care about anything other than what was in his little world. What he allowed in. But he wasn’t a bad person, far from it, and he was allowed his faults. He didn’t seem to mind, so why should she? Harry had shown her a lot more interest than most people she saw everyday, and he didn’t even know her when he started talking to her. He had just said he found her interesting. She wasn’t really sure what he meant by that, but she wasn’t going to pry. Maybe one day, when they were old and living in a little cottage in the countryside, she would ask.

Hermione blushed at her thoughts, but couldn’t help but smile. She could definitely see herself spending the rest of her life with Harry. Sitting in a rocking chair, knitting, with grandchildren at her feet, or huddled around Harry’s feet as he told them tales of his childhood or some such. Was that love? She didn’t know, but whatever it was, she knew it was powerful.

“Hermione?” Harry’s voice forced its way into her mind, and she blinked, looking up at him in confusion. “Hermione? You okay?”

“Uh,” Hermione looked around, finding herself standing in an unfamiliar corridor, before the statue of a cloaked wizard, “sorry, got lost in thought. What is it?”

"We're here," Harry said, pulling out his wand.

"Here?" Hermione looked around again. The corridor wasn't particularly interesting, why would Harry wasn't to show her this? In fact, she could hardly see much of it, due to the extreme dark that seemed to cloud the area.

"Well," Harry said raising his wand, "not quite."

Then he taped the statue of the dark wizard with his wand and the statue moved with a groan, a snake appeared out of the wizards opening mouth, and then Harry hissed like a snake. Hermione drew back, surprised and a little scared. Was that Parsletongue? The statue jerked backwards with another groan, revealing a hidden passage. What was this?

"Come on," Harry said, grabbing her hand again and pulling her along.

Hermione followed, watching in a sort of mixture of shock and amazement, as Harry led her through the passage and into a large Chamber lit by several lanterns along the walls. She jumped in surprise when the statue clicked back into place behind her.

"Hey," Harry said, getting her attention, "it's okay."

Hermione nodded, looking around the Chamber. She took in the seating area before her and the small kitchen at the back, and then looked up at the curving ceiling, staring at the great snake that seemed to slither above her in the candlelight.

"Harry," Hermione breathed, almost breathless, "what *is* this place?"

"It's Salazar Slytherin's Chamber," Harry said, with no preamble.

"Salazar?" Hermione gasped. "Salazar Slytherin? This is the Chamber of Secrets?"

"No," Harry laughed, "not quite. It's a secret Chamber like the Chamber of Secrets, but unlike the Chamber of Secrets, this one really was a secret. No Basilisk lives here. As far as I can guess,

Slytherin made this to keep his privacy, separate from his known chambers. No one knows it exist except me, Draco and now, you."

"Wow," Hermione mumbled, still staring at the snake on the ceiling.

"Yeah," Harry said, "it's pretty amazing. I started looking for it in my Third Year, after finding the Chamber of Secrets in my second. I figure, if he made one, what's to stop him making another? Hogwarts is a maze of secret tunnels and this is the meeting point. This place has a load of doors that lead into the walls, intersecting all through Hogwarts. From here, I can pretty much get anywhere. Not to mention the cosy little bed."

Hermione was too amazed to get the innuendo; she just nodded along to his words.

"Aside from that," Harry said, after a little cough, "it has a Training room and a Library full of Dark Arts books."

That was enough to get her attention, and she turned a sharp glare on him.

"Dark Arts books?" Hermione asked brusquely. "Oh Harry, please tell me you haven't read them?"

"Hey," Harry said, defending himself, "I'm not an idiot. I only read a few."

"A few?" Hermione gaped at him. "Harry, that was really stupid. The Dark Arts are seductive."

"Not to me!" Harry said angrily and Hermione gasped. "Sorry Hermione, but you seem to have forgotten what the darkest wizard of our age did to me. And what he intends to do. The Dark Arts hold no allure with me. I hate them."

Hermione hung her head. "I'm sorry," she said meekly. "I just...I..."

"Hey," Harry's finger came to rest under his chin and he forced her to meet his eyes, "it's okay. I'm sorry I snapped. I understand, you

where just worried. But I want you to understand that I'll never fall to the Dark Arts. Okay?"

Hermione nodded. She felt tears gathering in her eyes and closed them, willing them not to fall. Harry's fingers gently brushing at her eyelids made them snap open, and she stared at him as he wiped away her tears.

"I'm sorry I snapped Hermione," Harry whispered, his face close to her own, "I didn't mean to make you cry. Forgive me?"

Hermione nodded. She closed her eyes and he kissed away her tears, before capturing her lips for a soft, sensual kiss. When he pulled away, Hermione fell into his chest and let him hold her.

"This chamber is my secret place," Harry said, gently stroking her back, "the place I can come to where no one can find me. I'm safe here. Only you and Draco know this place exists. My best friends."

"Thank you for trusting me," Hermione mumbled into his robes, "it means a lot."

"Hey," Harry said, lifting her face to his own again, giving her a little kiss, "I trust you with my life Hermione. You're without a doubt the most important person in my life."

Hermione smiled gently, her cheeks blushing again. Harry smiled back at her. Hermione's heart swelled with adoration and joy, the tenderness of the moment seemingly making everything clear for the first time in her entire life.

"I love you," Hermione said.

Harry stared at her in shock, before he pulled back, and Hermione's beaming smile turned into a frown. Harry turned his back to her and tears once again surfaced to her eyes.

"Harry?" she whispered, choking on a sob.

"Erm," He said, hands in his pockets, "I...uh..."

“Harry?”

“You...love me?” Harry said, turning back to face her.

Hermione nodded, although a little meekly. Had she just ruined everything?

“Hermione,” Harry said, looking up at the snake, not meeting her eyes. Why wouldn’t he look at her? “Hermione, I...I’m not good with feelings. I...can’t express myself very well. You...took me by surprise. I...”

“You don’t love me?” Hermione asked, tears slowly trailing down her cheeks now.

“No!” Harry said, meeting her eyes sharply, and she finally saw how troubled and angry he looked. Why was he angry with her? “I didn’t say that. I just...I really care about you.”

“But you don’t love me?” Hermione pressed. Could she actually feel her heart breaking?

“I didn’t say that either,” Harry said, gulping, and taking a deep breath. “I’m sorry. Dammit! I really suck.”

“You...” Hermione frowned.

“Can we talk about something else?” Harry blurted out.

“I...what?” Hermione gasped. “Talk about something else? Just dismiss it like that?”

“You’re the one who brought it up!” Harry said, turning around furiously. “You said it. Not me. It’s not my fault...”

“I thought...you’re blaming me?” Hermione ground out.

“Oh fuck,” Harry growled, and he lashed out, kicking the side table angrily.

Hermione jumped back in shock.

"Look," Harry drew a ragged breath, "I really bollocked this all up. I'm sorry. I'm not trying to blame you. I'm even angry with you. I'm angry at myself because...because I can't...say it." Harry said the last part with his eyes cast down.

Hermione's anger popped like a balloon as realisation dawned. He wasn't angry with her, he was angry with himself. He couldn't say what he felt? Then, did he really love her as well?

"I think I understand," Hermione said, approaching him and placing a hand on his shoulder comfortingly. "It's okay Harry. I'm sorry I said it, if I made you uncomfortable. I didn't plan it; it just, kind of slipped out."

"Then you didn't mean it?" Harry asked, looking up at her with his intense green eyes.

"No," Hermione corrected, "I meant it. I just meant that I didn't even realise I loved you until then, with that moment, and I couldn't help myself. You don't have to say it back, I understand. I just hope I didn't scare you away."

"What?" It was Harry's turn to be surprised. He laughed a little uncomfortably. "You could never scare me off Hermione. You mean way too much to me."

"I know," Hermione smiled.

"Hey," Harry said, gesturing to a door to the left, "want to see the bedroom I have another surprise for you in there."

"Bedroom?" Hermione blinked. "Surprise? Harry, you better not mean what I think you mean!"

Harry burst out laughing. "No," he said, getting control of himself, "not that. I mean - I made you dinner... surprise!" He grinned.

"You made me dinner?" Hermione gasped. "Oh Harry!"

And she flung her arms around him, pulling him into a tight embrace. They spent the rest of the night eating, talking, kissing, and just enjoying each other's company. All was well again.

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Seventeen

Harry went back to Grimmauld Place for the Christmas Holidays. He didn't join the rest of the schools students down at the Hogsmeade train station, but went directly to Dumbledores office and quickly floored back home from there. It had been agreed that it was much safer this way. Sirius and Tonks greeted him on the other end, the first embracing him in a quick, manly black slapping hug, the second giving him a cheery smile.

"Wotcher Harry," Tonks said.

"Hey Tonks," Harry said, smiling slightly, "How are you?"

"Not too bad," Tonks said offhandedly.

Sirius guffawed, "When you're not moping over Remus!"

"Hey!" Tonks slapped him on the arm. "I don't mope," she said emphatically.

"You mope," Sirius said, "and you brood, and you glower at him, and he ignores you. Just shag already and get it over with!"

Harry covered his growing grin with his hand and coughed. Tonks swivelled her eyes to pierce him accusingly, and he just shrugged, holding up his hands in surrender. Tonks huffed and stormed out of the room, Sirius' laughter following her. Harry gave him a puzzled look.

"She fancies Moony," he said, "but Moony thinks she should find someone more suited to her, but everyone knows he fancies her too. It's pretty funny actually."

Harry chuckled. "I'm sure," he said.

"It's good to see you," Sirius said, clapping a hand to his shoulder.

"You too," Harry returned, "I've got so much to tell you."

“Ah,” Sirius said knowingly, but grinning all the same, “all in due time, but first, to the kitchen!” And Sirius marched a smiling Harry into said kitchen.

He motioned for Harry to take a seat and he did, claiming his usual place beside the head of the table, where Sirius sat. Sirius handed him a bottle of Butterbeer he had collected from the fridge and popped open his own, taking a quick swig and then letting out a drawn out ‘aah’ of pleasure.

“I never get tired of this stuff,” he said.

“Hmm,” Harry agreed, taking a swig of his own.

“Right then,” Sirius sat his bottle down on the kitchen table and looked at Harry, “what’s new then?”

“Someone is trying to kill someone at Hogwarts,” Harry said, getting right to the point, “only I have no idea who, on both counts.”

“Yeah,” Sirius said musingly, “Dumbledore mentioned it to me.”

“I bet he didn’t mention that I suspected Snape had something to do with it.” Harry said matter-of-factly, knowing he was right.

“Snivellus?” Sirius sat up in his chair, looking interested. “You think he’s not really loyal to Dumbledore?”

“I can’t prove it,” Harry said, “and at the moment it’s only speculation, but a lot of things don’t add up, and he’s connected to every one. Trying to have you soul sucked without even consulting anyone, my trouble with learning Occlumency – which, by the way, I’ve almost mastered on my own – and Mr. Weasleys death. I’ve calculated the time and with the snake venom in Nagini – that’s Voldemort’s snake – Mr. Weasley should still be alive. I told Snape not even half an hour after the dream and that venom takes at least three hours to kill someone. Snape had plenty of time to tell Dumbledore, but he didn’t, not until it was too late.”

“Damn,” Sirius cursed, “that’s pretty convincing to me, but I guess I’m a bit biased. Still, you should keep an eye on Snape, look for more suspicious behaviour.”

“Like the fact he picked up the necklace that Bell girl touched after she was taken away from sight,” Harry said, “but made perfectly sure he didn’t actually touch it with his flesh?”

“Yeah,” Sirius said, shaking his head, “like that.”

“I’ve told Dumbledore,” Harry said, “but you know what he’s like. He trusts Snape, for whatever reason, but I don’t. Be careful around him. I’m sure he’d like to find some way to get you out of the picture, just for old times sake.”

“Yeah,” Sirius ran a hand through his hair, “right. Any good news?”

Harry shrugged. “I met someone.”

“Someone?” Sirius blanched, then grinned. “As in, someone special?” Harry didn’t like the look in the eyes of his Godfather.

“Yes,” Harry said, pointing an accusing finger at Sirius, “but don’t you dare try to make fun of me or her. She’s a really nice girl, I’m sure you’d approve.”

“Oh?” Sirius asked, looking a little put out by Harry’s no teasing demand.

“Yeah,” Harry said, “she’s the smartest witch in our year, beautiful, really beautiful, and – this I’m sure you’ll love- she’s a Gryffindor.”

Sirius laughed out loud. “Aha!” he trumpeted. “Can’t stand any of those greasy Slytherin girls huh?”

Harry chuckled. “I don’t really care about many people Sirius,” Harry said, “never mind if they’re Slytherin girls, Gryffindor girls, or hell, even Hufflepuff girls. But Hermione is different. I’m sure I sound like a corny romantic fool, but she’s special.”

Sirius nodded. "My little boy's in love," he gushed, adopting a girly mother voice.

"Shut it!" Harry warned, and Sirius burst out laughing.

Harry couldn't help the smile that bloomed on his face.

(--)

Despite the fact Harry was in the company of a few people who didn't trust him (meaning Ron Weasley, his twin brothers and little sister Ginny: basically, the miniature Weasleys), he still had a hell of a Christmas holiday. Remus came by a lot, most notably on Christmas Day to share a meal with Sirius, the Weasleys, Tonks, and Harry. It was a nice meal, despite the fact Ron Weasley was glaring at him for the most part of it. He suspected the red head had something he wanted to say to him, and didn't have to wait long after the meal to find out.

He was washing his hands in the bathroom when Weasley barged in, slamming the door against the wall. Harry turned startled eyes on his intruder, who glowered at him fiercely.

"Do you mind?" Harry said, gesturing around vaguely.

"I know what you did," Ron said accusingly.

"Yeah," Harry said, "whatever, you think I killed your dad. I get it already."

"Not that!" Ron yelled, going red in the face. Was he embarrassed, or did that just happen when he was angry? "You attacked Katie Bell!"

"The chaser?" Harry blanched. "What makes you think that?"

"I saw your stupid friend Malfoy," Ron said, "hanging around the Quidditch pitch every time we had practice. You had him scouting us. You knew Katie was our best Chaser and you knew we'd beat you so you attacked her with that necklace thingy."

"I did, did I?" Harry growled, losing his patience with the annoying Gryffindor quickly. He'd had enough being accused. "You think I'd do that over a stupid game? You really think I'm that evil, don't you?"

"Yeah, I do!" Ron growled back.

"Then maybe I'll just slip into your room when you're asleep and kill you," Harry said, getting in the other boy's face, "because I could do that, you know. Anytime. I could have killed everyone in this entire house if I wanted too. Easily."

Ron laughed, though he looked a little nervous. "Yeah right," Ron scoffed, "you might be evil, but you're not that good of a wizard."

"Wanna try me?" Harry asked, opening his arms wide.

Harry didn't know what hit him, but it felt like a sledgehammer, and the next second he found himself on the floor, clutching his jaw. Ron stood glowering over him, fist clenched, fuming. Even though Seekers were built more for speed than power, it was surprising how strong Ron was, and Harry was tempted to stay on the floor. However, deciding he wouldn't let the other boy push him around, he stood up. He spat a little bit of blood that had oozed out of his tongue into the sink beside him and looked right in Ron's eyes.

"Feel better?" Harry ground out.

Ron was startled, obviously expecting another reaction. "What?"

"Listen to me," Harry said, "because I'm not going to repeat myself. You can hate me all you want, but I didn't kill your father and I didn't attack Katie Bell. I get that you need to blame someone for your father's death, but why you chose me I don't know. You should put the blame where it belongs. On Voldemort."

Ron flinched at the name.

"Everything okay in here?" A voice from behind Ron said, and when the taller boy moved aside, Harry saw Ginny Weasley in the hallway, holding a parcel and looking anxiously between the two.

“Yeah,” Ron grunted, “whatever. Bye.”

And he stormed off.

Harry spat more blood into the sink, before looking up and catching Ginny’s eyes on him. She smiled at him slightly and then walked away. Harry felt a smile come to his own face. Maybe not all the mini Weasleys hated him after all.

(--)

Ginny had arrived outside the bathroom in time to hear Harry telling Ron he needed to put the blame for their father’s death on Voldemort, and had waited with bated breath for Ron’s response, but when it didn’t look like he was going to say anything, or at least, anything good, she had intervened.

She felt like taking a club to her brother sometimes, he was that biased against Slytherin’s. He just couldn’t see that Harry wasn’t a dark wizard, no matter what. She didn’t know what it would take to open his eyes, but she hoped, whatever it was, that it happened soon.

After Ron had left, she gave Harry her best reassuring smile, hoping to cheer him up a bit, before heading to her bedroom. Ginny didn’t mind living in Grimmauld Place, it wasn’t that bad, especially since they had gotten rid of all of the dark magic that still lingered in the ancient house. Her mother just didn’t have the heart to live home anymore, with all the memories of her dad, and it was a lot more convenient that lived at headquarters anyway. Molly Weasley was like the secretary for the Order of the Phoenix, so to speak.

Her bedroom was pretty small, but bigger than her one at the Burrow, although that wasn’t really all that hard, seeing as her old bedroom was about the size of a large broom cupboard. Her new room was painted red, like her hair, and contained only a simple desk and bed. She really didn’t need all that much else. Her trunk had all the clothes she needed and was pushed under her bed to make room.

She sat down on her bed, fingering the small parcel in her hands. She had found the parcel in her trunk when she unpacked, with specific instructions not to open it until Christmas day. She had no

idea what was inside it, or who had put it in her trunk, or even how they had. She didn't know whether she should open it or not. What if it was some type of dark magic that attacked her like the necklace had attacked Katie Bell? That was one of the many outcomes her mind made up over the few days before Christmas day. She had been toying with the parcel all day, trying to decide what to do.

Now, holed up in her room, she took a deep breath and tore open the parcel. Relief flooded through her. It was a simple card with a landscape picture of the mountains around Hogsmeade and the little village nestled at the bottom, as if protected by two gigantic arms. Ginny smiled. It was a beautiful card. She opened it and two pieces of parchment fell to the wooden floor at her feet. She didn't reach for them straightaway, but read the text written inside the card:

'To Ginny, I hope you have a happy Christmas, Draco.'

Frowning, Ginny set the card aside and reached for the two pieces of parchment that had fallen free when she opened the card. She opened the folded one first and read:

'Hey Weasley, guess who? I'm sorry for having to break into your trunk, but I didn't know how to get this to you on Christmas day so I had no choice. Don't even ask me how I did it. It was hard work. Anyway, this is my way of saying Thank you for comforting me the other day. Also, for pestering you for so long, when you clearly aren't interested. So, I'm sorry, and I hope you can forgive me. I promise not to bother you anymore. The other piece of parchment is a twenty Galleon gift certificate for any shop on Diagon Alley. I'm not trying to buy you with money; I just didn't know what to get you. So I thought I'd let you choose and had to give you enough so that you could get whatever you wanted. Like I said in the card, I hope you have a good Christmas. Well, I think that will do, you won't believe how long it took me to even write this lame little note.'

A few sentences had been scribbled out here and Ginny smiled to herself, before she continued to read:

'Sorry, ignore the scribbling. Anyway, I hope you like your gifts and buy something nice with it.'

And it was signed with a scribbled:

'Draco Malfoy.'

Ginny folded up the note and pocketed it, then checked the other piece of parchment, and it was, indeed, a twenty Galleon gift certificate. She couldn't believe he had given her that much and she weren't sure if she would spend it. It just felt wrong. She didn't deserve it. She'd just been mean to him and made him feel like the bad guy, when she was the one being a bitch.

Either way, she was touched he had sent her the card, and a little curious as to what he had erased with his scribbling. What had he had second thoughts about? Putting the card up with the rest of the Christmas cards on her desk and added the gift certificate to her pocket.

Ginny spent the rest of the day musing on the missing sentences and when she went to bed that night, her dreams where filled with a silver haired boy with gorgeous mysterious grey eyes.

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Eighteen

Hermione spent the Christmas break with her parents at their home in Oxford. Her parents quizzed her on her grades at school, as was expected, and Hermione told them all about her classes. Hermione could tell her Mother was dying to ask her if she had made any new friends – which was something she did every time Hermione came home. When her Mother finally cornered her in her room, Hermione was resigned to her fate. No child liked to divulge the details of their first relationship.

“Hermione dear,” her Mother said, as she came into her room, “what are you doing hiding up here? Your Aunt Mary is here, you know.”

“Oh,” Hermione said, perking up, seeing a chance to escape, “then I guess I’ll go say hi.” And she got up to leave.

“Wait a moment dear,” her Mother cut her off, “I’d like to talk to you privately for a moment. Your Father doesn’t think I should pester you, but he doesn’t understand how a girls mind works. I want to know if you’ve made any new friends yet, like we talked about before you left for school.”

“Erm,” Hermione bit her lip as she sat back down on her bed, “I guess you could say that.”

“So you have made some friends?” Jane Granger asked.

“A friend...” Hermione mumbled.

“Just one friend?” Her Mother queried. “Well,” she went on, “I suppose that’s better than nothing. So who is this new friend?”

“His name is Harry,” Hermione said.

“Another boy.” Jane said thoughtfully.

“Yes,” Hermione replied with a sigh, “another boy.”

“How did you meet him then?”

“He sort of,” Hermione paused in thought, “well, he introduced himself to me. Then we started studying together almost every day. He’s really smart mum.” Hermione couldn’t keep the pride out of her voice when she said that last part, and her Mother noticed.

“Oh,” her Mother hummed, “I see. You like this boy then?”

“Like?” Hermione asked in confusion. “Of course I like him. He’s my friend.”

“You know what I meant Hermione,” her Mother chastised her.

“What do you...” Hermione stopped, finally realising what her mum meant, “Oh...well...”

“Well?”

“I,” Hermione couldn’t help herself: she blushed, and then whispered, “he’s my...boyfriend.”

“Your Boyfriend?” Jane Granger gasped and then beamed a smile at her blushing daughter. “Oh Hermione dear, why didn’t you say? That’s wonderful!”

“Uh...” Hermione blanched.

“How long have you been seeing him?” Her Mother asked, but didn’t wait for a response. “What’s he like?”

“Mum!” Hermione cut in before her Mother could go on. “Please.”

“Sorry dear,” her Mother said with a shy smile, “I’m just so happy for you.”

“Me too,” Hermione mumbled. “Harry is the best thing that ever happened to me. He’s really smart, like I said, and powerful, he can do things with a wand I can’t even imagine. He even invented a charm - he’s amazing! And he...he’s really handsome.”

“Oh dear!” Her Mother wrapped her up in a big hug. “I’m glad you finally found someone. He sounds...nice. How long have you been seeing him? Have far have you gone with him?”

“Mother!” Hermione gasped, surprised.

“I need to know Hermione,” her Mother defended herself, “we’ve never had the talk, you know. I just want to make sure you haven’t made a mistake.”

“I...we haven’t done that, if that’s what you’re asking.” Hermione fumbled. “We just kiss, that’s all. I’ve been seeing him for a few months.”

“And why didn’t you tell me?”

“I wanted to do it in person.” Hermione said. “I was waiting for the right moment.”

“Well,” Jane Granger hemmed, “better late than never. But I think we need to talk about sex dear.”

“Oh mum.” Hermione put her face in her hands, groaning. It was going to be a long night.

(--)

Harry returned to Hogwarts before the rest of the returning students, via the Floo network, appearing in the flames of Dumbledore’s fire and emerging into the Headmaster’s chamber. Dumbledore greeted him enthusiastically from behind his desk as Harry dusted himself off.

“Before you go Harry,” Dumbledore said, as he put his hand on the door handle to leave the room, “I’d like to see you for another lesson tomorrow. I believe you know the password.”

“I do,” Harry said, nodding his head, “I’ll see you then Professor.”

“Good day Harry.”

When Harry entered the Slytherin common room Draco was there to greet him, calling him over to the fireside seats. Harry took a seat and propped his feet up on one of the cushions.

"I have another lesson with Dumbledore tomorrow," Harry said, after looking around the room to make sure no one was listening in.

"I'm sure that'll be fun," Draco said sarcastically, "all he ever does is show you pointless memories about the Dark Lord. It's a waste of time, if you ask me. He should be showing you spells that can help you kill him, not memories that'll bore you to sleep."

"I'm not sure Dumbledore expects me to kill Voldemort," Harry said thoughtfully, "at least, not in the traditional sense. Besides, we can't battle each other with magic remember? Our wands don't work against the other. If we tried to battle with magic, we'd just cause Priori Incantatem."

"Then what?" Draco asked, frowning. "You gong to taunt him with your memories of his childhood until he...what? Has a mental break down and cries himself to death?"

Harry chuckled. "I really have no idea...yet."

Draco shook his head. "And what about our Junior Death Eater? Any new clues? Ideas?"

"Not yet," Harry replied, "but I've been thinking about it. I still say the best guess is Travis Grimsby. He fits the bill perfectly. I just need to find a way to see if he's been marked with the Dark Mark."

"I told you," Draco said warningly, "I'm not going to ask the girls if anyone has seen him naked, so don't even think about it!"

"Don't worry," Harry said with a laugh, "I don't think he'd let them see him naked anyway, if he is branded. Plus, we have no idea when he was branded, if he was branded, so any answer we get will likely be misleading. I think the best bet is to use the Invisibility Cloak and sneak into his dorm room. Maybe I can...I don't know..."

“See him naked?” Draco chuckled. “Ah, the price you pay for being a good guy.”

“Shut it Malfoy.”

“Harry!” A loud squeal erupted from over by the entrance to the common room, and the next second; Harry had a lap full of excited, obsessed girl.

“Draco!” Another loud squeal echoed, and over the mane of dark hair obscuring his face, Harry saw Pansy Parkinson launch herself into Draco’s lap.

“Ugh!” Draco grunted, shoving Pansy away from him. “Get off Parkinson.”

“Heather,” Harry said irritably, “would you get off my lap.”

“Oh,” Heather Pritchard jumped back to a standing position before Harry, “I’m sorry Harry. Are you hurt? What happened?”

“What do you two bints want?” Draco asked angrily.

“We missed you sweetie!” Pansy cooed, reaching out and trying to play with a lock of Draco’s hair from her seat beside his.

Draco slapped her hand away before she could touch his immaculate hair. Harry hid a smile behind his hand, catching Draco’s eyes, which narrowed warningly.

“Are you okay Harry?” Heather asked, sitting on the arm on his chair. “You seem distracted.”

Harry shook his head and made to stand up, but then he got an idea, and sat back down. Draco looked at him questioningly and Harry silenced him with a look.

“I’m okay Pritchard,” Harry said with a sigh, “just a little worried about this rumour I heard.”

“What is it?” Heather asked with an anxious look on her face.

"It's a bit embarrassing," Harry said, staring down at his shoes.

"You can tell me anything Harry," Heather cooed, "I promise I won't tell anyone."

"Well," Harry said, catching her eyes, "I just heard...I heard that Travis Grimsby," Harry lowered his voice to a whisper so that only Heather could hear him, "has a tattoo of a heart with my name written across it. I heard that he's gay and that he fancies me."

"Oh my!" Heather drew back with a gasp, a horrified look on her face, which was soon followed by a blush. She looked as if Harry had just told her the world was going to end.

"I know," Harry continued, "if this gets out any further, I'll be ruined. Look, could you do me a favour? Can you pay some extra attention to Grimsby, see if you can, you know," Harry wagged his eyebrows, "use your seductive wiles and beauty to get him naked. I just need to know if it's true or not. Would you do that for me baby?"

"Oh course!" Heather said breathlessly. "I would do anything for you Harry! Anything. And don't worry, I won't tell anyone."

"Good," Harry said, sitting back in his chair when she stood abruptly and grabbed Pansy's arm.

"Come on Pansy," Heather said, "we've got work to do." And the two clueless Slytherins raced off towards the girl's dormitories.

"Harry?" Draco asked, looking confused. "What are you doing?"

"Well," Harry put his arm out on either side of him, along the backs of the armchair, kicking his feet up again onto the stool before him, "I just thought, those two annoying harpies have been bugging us for years. Why not put them to some use?"

Draco laughed. "I guess, what did you say to her?"

"Never mind that," Harry waved it off, "the only thing that matters is this: by the end of the week, I'm pretty sure we'll know whether Grimsby is the Junior Death Eater or not."

Draco shook his head. "You know," he said, "sometimes I wonder why the sorting hat put you in Slytherin, but then you go and do something so devilishly Slytherin, I wonder how you could be anywhere but Slytherin."

Harry just shrugged.

(--)

Harry and Hermione are sitting in Slytherin's Chamber, a large selection of books arrayed before them. It was the day after Dumbledore's third lesson and Harry had told Draco all about it after the lesson the night before. Today it was Hermione's turn.

"So," Hermione said, trying to get her head around the information Harry was telling her, "first he showed you the memory of Morfin telling Vol-Volde...You Know Who about his family, before You Know Who went and killed the Riddles, including his father?"

"Yeah," Harry confirmed, "and then he showed me a memory he got from Slughorn, where Voldemort, then only known as Tom Riddle, asked Slughorn about something called Horcruxes. The memory had been tampered with, Dumbledore said, and it was pretty obvious. When Riddle asked about Horcruxes, it got all foggy, and I heard Slughorn shouting at him, something along the lines of 'I don't know anything about Horcruxes'. Obviously, Slughorn doesn't want Dumbledore to know what actually happened. These Horcruxes must be bad stuff, most likely Dark Magic, and I think Slughorn told Riddle about them."

"Horcruxes." Hermione hummed. "I've never even heard of them."

"Me either," Harry said, casting his eyes over to Slytherin's library, "but I think I know where to find out about them."

"Oh no," Hermione moaned, following his gaze, "don't Harry. I don't like the thought of you reading those Dark Arts books. Please, Harry, please don't read them."

"I have to Hermione," Harry said, "I have to find out about these Horcruxes."

"I know," Hermione said, "just don't read them. We can look in the school Library. I'll check all of my books. Just please don't read them."

"We won't find them there Hermione," Harry said.

"I..." Hermione fumbled. "Please just give me a chance to find them. If I don't then...I guess you can read them, but please give me a chance first. Promise me Harry."

"I...Oh, fine." Harry said, giving in to Hermione's pleading look. "I can't say no to you."

Hermione beamed a smile at him. "Thank you Harry."

"Yeah," Harry waved it away, "it's okay. Anyway - as I was saying, the memory was tampered with. Dumbledore wants me to get the real one from Slughorn."

"How?" Hermione asked inquisitively.

"Because Slughorns weakness is people like me," Harry said, "he seeks them out, you see. He tries to collect them, Dumbledore's words, not mine. If anyone can get it from him, it'll be me. I'll make him tell me."

"How?"

"I don't know yet," Harry said, "but I'll figure it out."

"Good luck."

(--)

Harry contemplated how to get the true memory from Slughorn all night, but by the time his next potions lesson came around, he was no closer to having any plan. He decided to just ask Slughorn about it, upfront, and see how the old wizard reacted. After waiting for the class to end, and giving Draco and Blaise a nod to dismiss them, he approached Slughorns front desk. He saw Hermione watching him

from the doorway, and smiled when she gave him an encouraging smile.

“Oho,” Slughorn said, spotting Harry approaching him, “and to what do I owe this prestigious pleasure? The great Harry Potter approaching me, when he always spurns my invitations.”

“Sir,” Harry said, ignoring the jab at his shadowy nature. He hadn’t attended one of Slughorn’s meetings, even though he was always invited. “I was wondering if we could have a word.”

“Very well,” Slughorn said, sitting down behind his desk, his belly almost popping the button of his trouser with strain, “what would you like to talk about?”

“Well,” Harry said, placing his hands on the wizard’s desk and leaning forward, “I wanted to ask you about Horcruxes.”

Slughorn went very still, but didn’t say a word.

“Or rather,” Harry went on, “a similar situation you found yourself in, almost fifty years ago, with another student.”

“I have no idea what you’re going on about,” Slughorn said stiffly, getting up again and walking away from Harry.

“I think you do,” Harry said, and for the first time, he tested his Legilimency skills. He caught Slughorn’s eye and probed with his mind, but was quickly blocked by some powerful Occlumency walls. The only thing he saw was a foggy vision of a young Voldemort, standing before Slughorn, but then it was gone, before it was even really there.

“Oho,” Slughorn said, waving a finger at him, “I wouldn’t try that again Harry.”

“Don’t play dumb with me Professor,” Harry said, narrowing his eyes, “I know you talked to Riddle about Horcruxes. I may not know what they are, but I know they can’t be good. You told him, didn’t you?”

“I told you,” Slughorn said, turning his back on Harry, “I have no idea what you are talking about boy. I suggest you leave before you get in trouble.”

Harry sighed. “Fair enough,” Harry said, leaving the classroom. He stopped outside and cast his eyes back, watching as Slughorn collapses back against his desk and a ran a podgy old hand over his forehead. It was a long shot anyway, but Harry was certain now. Slughorn was definitely hiding the real memory, and he was ashamed of it.

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Nineteen

Harry was on his way down to the Great Hall for breakfast, having just left the Slytherin common room behind, where a large gathering of students were hovering by the notice board, reading and re-reading the large sign advertising the up-coming Apparition lessons for all students in the seventh year of Hogwarts. Blaise was the one who had pointed it out to him when he roused from his slumber, but in truth, Harry already knew it was there, as he had been out all night in Slytherin's chamber, trying to think of a way to get the memory from Slughorn. Harry remembered to act surprised and slightly happy about the news and glanced at it briefly before the leaving the common room.

Harry was excited about the prospect of learning to Apparate, but it just wasn't a big deal at the moment. He was too busy trying to figure out a way to get the memory from Slughorn and discover the identity of the Junior Death Eater. Harry hoped Heather Pritchard would get back to him soon, but he wasn't holding his breath.

Coming up the steps from the dungeons, into the Entrance Hall, Harry spotted Neville Longbottom coming down the marble stairs from the first floor. The slightly overweight boy seemed to have grown over the few weeks since he had last seen him and he was somewhat slimmer than Harry expected, but still the same old Neville. He held a bundle of books in one hand and was examining a weird looking plant that he held in the other, not even looking where he was going.

Harry saw what was going to happen before it did, but was never the less too late to stop it. Neville ended up treading on robes that looked a little bit too big for him and stumbled, his feet flying out from under him, the strange plant flying out of his hand and heading for the stone floor. Harry reacted instinctively, casting two spells almost simultaneously.

"Accio! Wingardium Leviosa!" One after another, the two spells hit, the first summoning the flying plant straight into Harry's free hand and the other stopping Neville from breaking his neck on the marble staircase.

Neville was hovering in mid air, hands covering his face, his books scattered below him in various states of disarray. Neville's breath came in ragged gasps, and when a few seconds had past and he hadn't hit the floor, he slowly moved his hands and stared around with wide, panicky eyes. His bulging eyes met Harry's and widened further.

"You okay Neville?" Harry asked, setting him down on his rump on the marble steps.

"Huh?" Neville blinked. "Oh, yeah, err... thanks." He said the last word rather stiffly.

"Here," Harry handed him the weird cactus shaped plant, "what the hell is this thing?"

"Oh!" Neville's eyes lit up with wonder, something Harry had never seen before. "This is my *Mimulus mimbletonia*." He said proudly. "It's a really rare plant."

"It looks odd," Harry said, weighing it in his hands, "like a cactus, but without the needles."

"What's a cactus?" Neville asked eagerly.

"Never mind," Harry said, "here you go." And he handed the plant over to Neville.

"Yeah," Neville said, studying the grey plant again, "I guess it does look a bit bad, but it's not supposed to look that bad. It's been getting worse every day. The boils are supposed to be full of this really useful pus, but they've just hardened, it's like they've formed scabs all over the plant. I don't know what's wrong with, it's why I was reading up about them." He gestured to the scattered books.

"Wish I could help," Harry said, picking up a few of the books, "but Herbology really isn't my strong suit. Ask me to defeat a Dark Wizard any day, no problem, but don't ask me to look after a plant."

Neville smiled slightly. "Not as good as everyone makes you out to be then?" He asked a little coldly.

"I never claimed to be a genius," Harry said, "I can't help what people say about me. I really wish you would trust me Neville. We could be good friends."

Neville laughed. "Yeah right," he said, colouring slightly, "why would you even want to be friends with me?"

"You really ought to work on that confidence of yours," Harry replied, "it's what holds you back the most, you know. I happen to know a lot about you. We have a lot in common, but I can only share that with you once you let me past your defences."

"We don't have anything in common!" Neville said angrily. "I'm nothing like you! I don't care what you say, I know you're up to something."

"Do you really believe that?" Harry asked calmly. "Or are you just trying to make me the bad guy because you have feelings for Hermione."

"I...uh..." Neville spluttered, going red in the face.

"Listen to me," Harry said, "I understand why you're so angry with me, but you have to realise that Hermione will never like you as anything more than a friend. Do you even really like her that way? I'm not so sure, but if you continue to press this, it's only going to end badly. Worst case scenario, you lose Hermione as a friend, do you want that?"

"...No." Neville whispered.

"Then let it go," Harry said, "and try to give me a chance. I'm sure there's some girl out there for you Neville, but it isn't Hermione. You know that, don't you?"

"...I guess." Neville admitted.

"Right then," Harry drew himself up and stuck his hand out, "fresh start?"

Neville looked up at him from his perch on the marble stairs, then sighed, and reached out, taking Harry's hand. "Fresh start," he said.

"I'm sure Hermione will be pleased," Harry said, "she's being going spare over how you've been treating me, but I stopped her from having a go at you."

"Thanks," Neville muttered, blushing, as Harry pulled him to his feet.

"No problem," Harry said, "it's all behind us now."

"Yeah," Neville said, picking up the rest of his books with one hand. Harry handed him the rest.

"See you tonight in the Library?" Harry asked.

"Sure," Neville said with a small smile.

"If you still can't figure out what's wrong with your plant," Harry said, "bring your books along and we'll see if we can find anything out. After all, I'm sure three brains are better than one, especially when one of them belongs to Hermione Granger."

"Right." Neville said, grinning.

(--)

The Apparition Lessons started and despite the fact Harry found the instructor to be overly annoying, he did well. By the end of the first lesson, he had managed to move himself into the hoop placed before him. He was the only one to manage it, and Twycross made quite a fuss over him, whereas almost everyone else seemed to just glare at him, like it was his fault they couldn't do it. The only other exciting incident in the lesson was when a Hufflepuff managed to splinch themselves, leaving behind half a leg.

Lesson's continued over the next few weeks. Harry continued to improve, Apparating all over the place, whilst the other students steadily followed his example. The only one close to him was Hermione, who managed to Apparate successfully during the second lesson and improve greatly from then on. Neville had trouble, but with

a little coaching from Harry during their study sessions, he soon got the hang of it as well, much to his own surprise. Draco wasn't too far behind Hermione, drawing level with Neville.

After a particularly exhausting Apparition Lesson that saw Harry attempting to Apparate to the top of the Astronomy Tower, Harry and Draco made their way slowly back the Slytherin common room. They were almost half way there when Heather Pritchard's voice reached their ears, and Harry slowed to a stop, Draco following his example more slowly.

"Harry," Heather came running up to him, before bending over, resting her hands on her knees and panting, "Harry, I did what you asked," she said, casting her eyes over Harry's shoulder to Draco. He smirked at her.

"Go on then," Harry said, turning and starting to walk again, though he looked keen to hear the news. Draco started ahead as well, keeping up a faster pace so Harry could have some privacy. He still didn't know what Harry had said the annoying bint and he wasn't going to invade his friend's privacy over it, he respected him too much. Pritchard started walking again, rushing a little to keep on level with Harry.

"I did what you said," she said, her breath coming in gasps, "like you asked. That seventh year, Grimsby, the one you heard had a tattoo of your name on his arm. I kept cornering him and trying to seduce him, but he kept refusing me, at first. I assumed it was because you were right, and he really was a fag, but eventually he gave up. It took a while, but I saw him naked."

"And?" Harry asked impatiently.

"I don't know Harry." Heather said. "He had a bandage over his arm the whole time. I tried to get him to take it off, but he wouldn't. He said he was stung by a Zolam spider and that his arm was, like, inflamed or something. I'm sorry."

"Damn," Harry hissed under his breath.

“Sorry,” Heather said again, batting her eyelashes at him, “but I can try again if you really want me too. You know I’d do anything for you Harry.”

“Yeah,” Harry muttered, “whatever.” And then he sped up, leaving her behind. He could hear her yell something at him, something that sounded like a ‘goodbye’, but he couldn’t be sure.

He caught up with Draco, drawing even with him. Draco looked at him out of the corner of his eye, wordlessly asking him what happened. He answered.

“Nothing then,” Draco said with a sigh.

“Well,” Harry said, “nothing conclusive. He suspiciously has a bandage on his arm where the Dark Mark should be. Also, apparently, he was bitten by a Zolam snake, which can cause irritation and a slight stinging sensation for months, which means he’ll probably have the bandage on his arm for the rest of the year.”

“Sounds like a pretty good cover for the Dark Mark, if you ask me.” Draco said.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed, “either way, the more we investigate this Grimsby, the more he looks like the Junior Death Eater. Still, I’d like some solid proof before I go to Dumbledore, but how the hell do we get it short of tackling him in the Great Hall and ripping his bandage off.”

Draco chuckled. “Yeah, but seriously, I veto that idea. I really don’t fancy being wrong in front of the entire population of Hogwarts.”

Harry echoed Draco’s laugh. “I wasn’t being serious and you know it.”

“I have an idea,” Draco said, looking oddly thoughtful.

“Well?” Harry asked.

“Well,” Draco said, deliberately echoing Harry, “we could dose him with Veritaserum and question him.”

"How?" Harry asked. "You expect us to just walk up to him, shove the potion down his throat and then badger him in the middle of the Slytherin common room. I've been watching him Draco and his seventh year friends always surround him. Besides, how would we get the Veritaserum? I'm pretty sure Snape wouldn't give it to me, you know how dodgy he is around me, especially now that I can block him from my mind."

"Yeah," Draco said, shrugging, "that was a lame idea. To be honest, I'm just reaching. I really have no idea."

"And this isn't my only problem," Harry said, "I have to get that damn memory from Slughorn as well. I really don't have time to do both things at once."

"I could handle the Junior Death Eater situation," Draco drawled, "if you want?"

"Sure," Harry agreed, "that'd be great, but don't get yourself caught or anything Draco. No stupid stunts, okay?"

"Me?" Draco looked mock offended. "Stupid stunts? You wound me."

Harry smiled. "Just be careful okay? Need I remind you we're surrounded by a lot of Voldemort supporters, and they probably wouldn't take to kindly to you snooping around Grimsby."

"Yeah," Draco said, grimacing, "that wouldn't be a good situation. It's creepy enough having to sleep with Nott, Goyle and Crabbe in the same dorm, but if the entire Slytherin population knew I was against Voldie, that'd be rough. I just about get by under the excuse that I'm doing my father's will by being your friend."

"Hey," Harry said, stopping Draco with a hand on his arm, "it really means a lot to me Draco - you being my friend. I know how much risk being my friends puts you in, and I just want you to know - "

"Hey!" Draco said, raising his hands, eyes widening in horror. "Please, no girly moments."

Harry laughed. "Right," he said, then slapped Draco's arm in a manly show of affection, "let's head to Slytherin's chamber. I want a rematch from last night's chess game, and I'm so going to kick your ass this time."

"You're on!"

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Twenty

The first few weeks back at Hogwarts flew by quickly for Ginny. This year she was taking her OWL's and that meant lots and lots of homework and revision, which meant less and less relaxation. Time seemed to just speed by when she was busy and before she knew it, she had been back at Hogwarts for over a month.

Ginny was currently sitting in the Gryffindor common room, a pile of books surrounding her. She had her quill tucked behind her ear, a habit she had picked up from her Ravenclaw friend Luna Lovegood. As her brown eyes scanned the books before her, she heard her brother complaining about not being able to Apparate, and looked up. He was talking rather loudly with his friends Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan.

"I just can't seem to do it right," Ron said, running a hand through his red hair, "and I know it's all that Potters fault. He's always gloating about being able to do it easily, like everything else in his life. I swear, I bet he cheats somehow. No one is that good."

"I don't know mate," Seamus said with his thick Irish accent, "I almost did it the other day, did you see?"

"Yeah, yeah," Dean waved him off with practiced ease, "we heard you the first five thousand times. I think you're right Ron, every time I see Potter's friend Malfoy he always smirks at me, like he's mocking me. I bet he knows what Potter's doing, hell, I bet he's doing it himself. He got the hang of it pretty quickly, didn't he?"

"Oh shut up," Ginny had had enough. She stood up from behind her books and began to angrily cram them into her bag. For some reason, she felt the need to defend Draco and Potter. "You're just jealous they're better wizards than you."

The three Gryffindors gazed at her with shock, Ron's mouth hanging open and Dean's cheeks flushing angrily.

"Oh yeah?" Dean snapped. "You're suddenly an expert with all things Malfoy now are you? Or did you join Potter's fan club?"

“Shut up,” Ginny returned, “you sound like a petulant child. Just because I’m smart enough to realise the truth.”

Ginny brushed angrily past them on the way to the exit, turning back once to add:

“And in case you didn’t notice, Neville got the hang of it just as quickly, so is he cheating as well?”

“Err...” Dean gaped at her.

“That’s what I thought,” Ginny said with satisfaction, turning her back on them and leaving the Gryffindor common room behind. She was late for a study session with Luna anyway.

Making her way down the lonely halls of Hogwarts, Ginny’s mind wandered, inevitably coming to rest on a certain silver haired Slytherin. She couldn’t help it, but whenever she had any free time lately – which, granted, wasn’t all that often – her mind just instantly leapt to Draco. He invaded her mind like a parasite...an extremely good looking and sweet parasite. Yes, sweet, you heard right. Ginny was surprised herself, but Draco had been incredibly nice to her lately. She had only seen him in passing, but every time she did, he gave her a little shy smile that made her heart flip and heat rise to her cheeks. Not to mention the gift he gave her for Christmas.

She wasn’t exactly sure what had caused the 180 shift in his personality, but she liked to think it was because of her. Maybe being rejected over and over again woke him up to the truth, like a splash of cold water in the morning, and he no longer thought he was Merlin’s gift to women. Did that make her egotistical? She didn’t know, but she liked to think that she had something to do with it. Maybe he had always been that way and she just hadn’t seen it. Either way, she liked what she saw now, so when she woke up from extremely nice (but naughty) dreams, she was not sickened anymore. Just a little embarrassed.

As if her musing had summoned him, Draco suddenly appeared before her, coming around the corner. Not paying attention (too busy thinking naughty thoughts!) to where she was going, she almost collided right with him, but his quick reflexes saved her when he

grasped her shoulders firmly. She gasped, her eyes flicking up to his silver ones and widening, her mouth an 'O' of surprise.

"Weasley," Draco said, a goofy grin on his face, "watch yourself, don't want to be falling now, do you?"

"Err..." she was speechless for a few seconds, but finally her mind kicked into gear again, and she smiled back, "no, I certainly don't. Thanks for saving me."

"Anytime," Draco said, still grinning his goofy grin, "anytime."

He let go of her, making to step by her. Ginny's eyes scanned the hallway, it was empty, and then she reached out and grabbed his arm as he was leaving.

"Wait," she said. Draco turned surprised eyes to her. "You don't have to run off, you know. I...we haven't talked in a while. How are you?"

"Oh," Draco ran a hand through his hair nervously, and Ginny smiled at the cute blush on his face, "I'm okay, you?"

"I'm great," Ginny said, "well, mostly. OWL's this year, it's hard work."

"I remember," Draco replied. "Hey, did you get my card?"

"I did," Ginny returned with a smile, "it was wonderful, thank you."

"And the gift voucher?" Draco asked. "What did you get with it?"

"I haven't used it yet," Ginny said, playing with the hem of her robes idly. Why was this so awkward? *Because every time you look at him you imagine what it would be like to kiss him*, her mind supplied sarcastically. Oh, yeah, right.

"How come?" Draco queried. "Is it not enough? I could get you more you know."

Ginny chuckled uncomfortably. "No, it's fine. It's more than enough...too much, I think, actually."

"What do you mean?" Draco asked in confusion.

"I can't accept a gift like that Draco, it's just not right, I didn't do anything to deserve it."

"You don't need too," Draco said quickly and defiantly, "it's a gift. Please, just take it. You don't need to do anything to deserve. I just...wanted to do something nice for you. Please."

"I..." Ginny fumbled. "I really shouldn't, but...I guess...if you really insist."

"I do."

"Okay then," Ginny said, giving in, "I suppose I'll accept it, but you have to let me do something for you."

"Oh?" Draco smiled.

"Yeah," Ginny confirmed, "anything you want. A favour."

"Well," Draco said with a smirk, "there is something."

Ginny was a little surprised at his smirk, something she hadn't seen him do in a long time. Looking back on her conversation with him, she groaned, realising the trap she had set herself in. He's going to say something dodgy.

"Will you go to Hogsmeade with me this weekend?" Draco asked, his smirk gone, replaced by a look of nervous anticipation and...fear?

"Uh..." Ginny was, once again, surprised. Would she ever figure out what was going on inside the head of one Draco Malfoy? "Will I...? You mean...a date?"

"Erm," Draco lowered his head meekly, "if you want it to be."

Ginny felt the heat rise to her cheeks as he mind whirled with thoughts of Draco and herself - holding hands, eating ice cream together, hugging, playing in the snow, kissing in the snow...you get the idea.

"I'd...like that." Ginny admitted, barely audibly.

"What?" Draco looked shocked. He was probably expecting to be harshly rebuffed again. Once again, Ginny felt herself mentally berating herself. *I'm such a bitch!* She thought.

"I said, I'd love to go on a date with you." Ginny repeated, firmly and clearly, meeting his eyes.

Draco grinned, his white teeth showing, his silver eyes sparkling with joy. He ran a hand through his hair again.

"...Great," he said, unable to stop smiling. "Shall I meet you in the entrance hall then? We can walk down together."

"Sure," Ginny nodded.

"I look forward to it," Draco said, his eyes darting around anxiously.

"Me too," Ginny whispered, her eyes lowering to the floor. Before she could even react, she felt Draco take her shoulders, and as her eyes shot up, she watched as Draco came closer, his lips descending, pressing lightly to her cheek. She opened her eyes (when did I close them again?) and stared at him. He stared back, his cheeks bright.

"Sorry," he whispered.

"It's okay," she replied, whispering as well.

"Bye," he said, backing up, letting go of her shoulders.

"Bye," she returned.

And with this monosyllabic end to the conversation, the two separated, Draco going back to doing whatever he was doing, and Ginny standing still in the hallways for a time, how long she wasn't sure. When she finally came back to herself, she jumped, blushing, realising she was now dreadfully late for her meeting with Luna. She quickly dashed to the library.

(--)

Draco returned to the Slytherin common room, smirking all the way. Everything was going as planned. The little Weasel was falling for him quicker than he thought she would. It was no trouble to him of course; it just made his task easier. He sauntered into the common room, still smirking, and spotted Blaise sitting by the fireplace. He wandered over.

"Ah," Blaise said with a grin, looking up as Draco approached, "if it isn't lover boy Draco. How goes things on the Weasley front?"

"Great," Draco boasted, sitting down across from the cocky Slytherin, "I'm sure I'll have her in the sack soon. No problem."

"Finally," Blaise said, "I was beginning to get worried. Thought you might be losing your touch."

"Yeah right," Draco scoffed.

"You've got to admit," Blaise said thoughtfully, "the Weaslette is proving quite a challenge. More than any before her, that's for sure. Remember that stupid Ravenclaw you got in less than two days, that was a classic."

Draco chuckled. "Yeah," he said, "and I thought Ravenclaws were supposed to be smart?"

Blaise laughed. "Me too," he said.

"Anyway," Draco leant back into the chair, resting his arms along its back, "I'm sure I'll have good news for you pretty soon. And then, once that's done, I'm going to crush the uptight bitch."

"Wow," Blaise said, shaking his head, "I don't think I've ever seen you so determined to conquer a girl, she really must have pissed you off. I got to say, it's good to see. I was beginning to think you'd gone Gryffindor on me."

Draco laughed mockingly. "Yeah right, me? Gryffindor? You must be kidding."

“Well,” Blaise stood up, stretching his waking muscles, “be sure to tell me when you’re going to break the poor little blood traitors heart. I definitely don’t want to miss it.”

Draco felt a spark of anger at Blaise, but shook it off. “Right,” he said coolly.

“Later.” Blaise wandered off.

Draco watched him go, wondering why he suddenly felt really guilty. He wasn’t having second thoughts, was he?

Draco shook his head, smirking. *Second thoughts?* He thought. *Yeah right!*

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Twenty-One

The first Hogsmeade trip of term arrived on a windy, but otherwise fine day. As was typical during a Hogsmeade weekend, Hogwarts was mostly empty, most of the students having piled out of the castle during the early hours of the day. They wouldn't be returning until darkness was falling.

Choosing to avoid the crowd this time, Harry was waiting for Hermione in the entrance hall, his body concealed by his Imperceptible Charm. Curiously, when he had awoken this morning, he found that Draco was nowhere to be seen. Wondering idly where his best friend had gone, he had quickly gotten ready, cast the Charm, and made his way down to the entrance hall. He wasn't waiting long.

Hermione arrived less than five minutes after him and he called her over, again noticing the look of momentary confusion on her face when she didn't recognise him, followed by the recognition and beaming smile that made her look all the more beautiful to him.

"Harry," she said in greeting, walking up to him and taking his hand, "have you been waiting long?"

"Yeah," he said, grinning at her, "you really shouldn't keep a guy waiting you know. We can get all sorts of ideas. I was beginning to think you didn't like me anymore." Harry did his best to sound like your typical ditzy blond girl, affecting the highest voice he could.

Hermione giggled. "Don't be silly," she chastised lightly, smiling.

Together they made their way down to Hogsmeade, holding hands the whole way, without even noticing it. It had become instinctual to them both. Whenever they were together, they normally clasped hands, without even a conscious thought. It was a testament to their familiarity with each other, that closeness that only comes with someone you can really relax around - the simple intimacy of a simple act like holding hands.

As they wandered down the path to Hogsmeade, Hermione curled her arm around Harry's, pulling herself into his warmth and resting her head lightly on his strong shoulder. He placed a small kiss on her

head and tightened his grip on her arm, loving the moment, and loving her.

It was something that annoyed Harry greatly, his inability to talk about or voice his feelings. He figured it came from growing up with nobody. The isolation he felt as a child creating a barrier around himself and his heart. It's not that he didn't feel, or that he couldn't love, just that he could not express it. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't tell Hermione he loved her. And he had tried, over and over again. He could say the words when he was alone, but they always felt wrong to his ears, like he shouldn't be saying them. Every time he tried to tell Hermione, the words just wouldn't come. It was like his throat closed up, blocking anything from escaping.

Harry hated it, but he was unable to do anything about it, and so he tried to tell her in other ways, his actions and his attentions - anything that would show her how he felt. He just hoped she understood and that someday, he would be able to get those three tiny little words that meant so much out.

(--)

Ginny was nervous, so dreadfully nervous. She was waiting for Draco at the entrance to Hogsmeade, having walked down with her friend Luna, who was only coming down to pick up some supplies. They had split up at the entrance and Ginny had spent the last ten minutes waiting nervously, hopping on the spot. Was he not coming? Did he change his mind? How many times had those thoughts flittered through her mind? All they did was add to her nervousness.

She had a lot to be nervous about. She was about to actively, publicly, go on a date with a Slytherin. And not just a Slytherin, but also a Malfoy, a member of the family most hated in her family. If Ginny had been any bit educated in the Muggle world, she might have compared her situation to that of Romeo and Juliet. Not being, however, she could only wait and bite her lip pensively.

Another question that had entered her mind on more than one occasion since she had asked Draco out on this date suddenly sprung itself on her once again, and she found herself checking her surroundings. Nobody was around. The rest of the student body

would be further down the street, clogging up the most visited areas in Hogsmeade – including the Three Broomsticks and outside of the Shrieking Shack.

Sighing with relief, she went back to looking and waiting for Draco. What was the question?

“What am I going to do if Ron sees us together?” Ginny mumbled under her breath.

Out of all the questions, this one caused her the most trouble. Not to mention lack of sleep. No matter how much she thought about it, it could only end one way. Fighting. Either Ron would attack Draco, which was pretty much a given, and beat Draco up, or he would attack Draco and get beaten up. Neither option appealed to her. Ginny hated fighting.

She may appear to be strong on the outside, but inside, Ginny knew she was weak. Ever since she was used and taken into the Chamber of Secrets, Ginny had been terrified of the dark, of closed in spaces, and of violence and blood. Even though she didn't really remember much of her time spent in the Chamber, she still had nightmares, and that was more than enough to terrify her. She tried to act as brave and as tough as she could, but she knew, if anything bad ever did happen, she would mostly likely fall apart. She was just weak.

Shaking her head to get rid of those thoughts, Ginny forced herself to focus on the path before her. Anything but those nightmare visions of gigantic snakes with blood covered fangs and the dark, echoing sound of nothingness.

Coming back to herself, Ginny realised she was shaking and that she had apparently wrapped her arms around herself at some point. Forced the shakes to stop, Ginny took a deep steadying breath and looked up at the path, spotting a figure approaching her. Black cloak, green snake emblem (don't think about it!), and of course, his notorious silver hair. It was Draco.

“Hi,” she said quickly, blushing at how pathetic she sounded.

“Hey,” Draco said, coming to a stop before her, “sorry I’m late. I was...kind of nervous.”

“Me too,” Ginny admitted, smiling at his bashful look.

“Shall we then?” Draco said, motioning towards the village.

“Okay,” Ginny squeaked, and before she could even think twice about it, she grabbed his hand and started towards the village.

She wasn’t going to be weak. She wasn’t going to be afraid. She was going to be strong. She was going to face them all.

(--)

Draco smirked inwardly, his plans continuing smoothly. He had idled back at Hogwarts before starting towards Hogsmeade, leaving Ginny to sweat, and also so that he could pretend to be nervous about their ‘date’. He wasn’t in the slightest. It was just another step that had to be taken, so that he could eventually humiliate the girl. He was going to do it publicly, so their relationship had to be public knowledge. On top of that, he was hoping to bump into her brother. No doubt the idiot Gryffindor would try to pick a fight. Draco was counting on it.

Noticing that Ginny had come to a stop, Draco looked up. He spotted a few students just down the street, loitering outside Zonko’s. They looked like seventh years to Draco. He glanced at Ginny, who looked a little pale, then gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. He took a breath (for show) and then spoke:

“Come on,” he said, “don’t worry about them. Let’s go, okay?”

Ginny took a breath, mirroring him, then nodded. “Yeah,” she said.

Together they strode down the street. The three seventh years looked up as they approached, but only two of them showed any shock. The last one didn’t seem to care. However, the other two stared at them like they were walking down the street naked, one of them ineffectually pointing at them.

"Ignore them," Draco muttered reassuringly, making Ginny relax a little. He saw her nod out of the corner of his eye as they passed the gaping students.

But now they were entering the town proper, and more and more students began to appear. Like the seventh years, some stared, and some pointed, but most of them began whispering to friends. A murmuring babble broke out wherever they went, following them like a Homing Charm. They passed Professor Snape at one point - who glanced questioningly at Draco - but he didn't say anything.

The first person to actually approach them was a Ravenclaw from Ginny's year. As the exuberant girl advanced on them, Draco recognised her as Ginny's friend, the one he had seen her with on many occasions when he had been watching her. Her name was Luna Lovegood, but most people called her 'Loony' Lovegood.

"Hullo Ginny," she said, coming to an abrupt stop before them (almost colliding with them, in fact), before turning her everlastingly surprised eyes to Draco, "Hullo, I'm Luna Lovegood. Pleased to meet you."

"Erm." To say the girl threw Draco would have been an understatement. Didn't she know who he was?

"I wonder what everyone is looking at?" Luan murmured, glancing around at all the staring faces, before turning to look at Draco and Ginny again. "Do I have something on my face? It's not a Pimple Pixie is it?"

"No," Ginny said, smothering a giggle, "it's not you. It's us. They're staring at us."

"Whatever for?" Luan asked, looking even more startled. Draco figured this time she was actually surprised. Luan looked around at everyone, and when she spoke, she raised her voice: "Don't you people know it's rude to stare."

Ginny laughed out loud, all evidence of her nervousness gone. Draco looked at her, taking in her beauty as she laughed, her dimpled cheeks and mirth filled eyes. He was momentarily stunned, because

the next thing he knew Luan was snapping her fingers in front of his face.

"Do you think he's all right?" she asked Ginny with genuine concern.

Ginny just started laughing again.

"I'm fine!" Draco snapped. He was pleased to see her taken aback. The girl was just plain weird, no wonder everyone called her 'Loony'.

"No need to snap Draco." Ginny said through her chuckles, before turning her attention to Luna. "Don't mind him, he's really sweet really. He just thinks he has to act all tough because he's a boy," she grinned playfully at Draco, who, despite himself, couldn't help but smile back.

What the hell is wrong with you? He berated himself. She's taking the piss out of you and you're bloody smiling about it! Snap out of it!

"He's doing it again," Luna said blandly.

Ginny just laughed again.

They left Luna behind and continued further into Hogsmeade, doing their best to ignore the stares. Ginny seemed a bit better now after meeting her friend, though how she could be friends with someone that odd he would never understand.

"Where do you want to go first?" Draco asked.

"I don't know," Ginny said, "but I don't mind if you pick. Surprise me."

"Okay," Draco said, giving her a smile. She just continued to play into his hands, didn't she? He started walking towards the Three Broomsticks.

"Wait," Ginny said, jogging to keep up with him, "the Three Broomsticks? Isn't that a little crowded? I don't want to cause a scene."

“Don’t worry,” Draco said, pulling her along by the hand, “it’ll be good. We have to show that we aren’t afraid. We’re on a date and we aren’t ashamed of it, right?”

“I guess,” Ginny conceded, obviously unable to argue with him.

But Draco suspected she was afraid of something else. Perhaps the thing he was looking forward too? After all, where else would Ron Weasley be but the Three Broomsticks? Draco saw him there every time, without fail, and always with his little friends.

He pushed open the doors to the pub and entered, his eyes searching for the familiar red hair. It didn’t take him long to find it. A few seconds passed as they stood in the doorway and the noise and ruckus expected in the pub continued, before it started to quiet down. Eyes began to turn towards them, all belonging to Hogwarts students. Draco didn’t care about those eyes. He was staring at the back of Ron Weasley’s head.

“No Draco,” Ginny whispered, “we should go. I don’t want to be here, please...”

But it was too late. That moron Dean Thomas, the one who used to go out with Ginny in fact, had spotted them. He went pale. The boy next to him, Seamus Finnegan, was looking around, obviously wondering why it had gone silent. Dean Thomas stood up sharply, his eyes locked on Draco and Ginny. Ginny was trying to pull him out of the pub. Finally, Ron Weasley noticed what was going on, and looked up at Dean, before turning his head.

The look on his face was priceless.

“What the *fuck*?” Dean Thomas bellowed, pointing at Ginny, not caring about the fact that he was surrounded by students and Professors alike.

“Oh no,” Ginny moaned, giving up on pulling on his arm.

“Relax Ginny,” Draco whispered, getting in character, “ignore them.”

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Dean Thomas roared, starting over towards them.

Seamus had stood up as well, but he just looked confused. The one Draco was interested in, Ron Weasley, had yet to move. He was just staring at them in shock.

"What are you doing with *him*?" Dean yelled, right in front of their faces now. He wasn't speaking to Draco though.

"Please don't Dean," Ginny begged, her nervous eyes darting between Dean and her immobile Brother.

"Don't what?" Dean said, before pointing a finger at Draco. "Do you know who that is?"

Draco slapped his hand away. "Don't point at me idiot," he said.

"That's it!" Dean yelled, grabbing Ginny by the arm roughly.

Draco was on him in a second, grabbing him by the throat with one hand and pointing his wand at him with the other.

"Don't you dare touch her!" he roared.

Draco was caught up in everything, he didn't even realise he wasn't acting anymore.

Finally, the Professors seemed to come to their senses. The huge oaf Hagrid came bounding towards them, pushing past the startled little Professor Flitwick.

"Now, now," he roared, pulling Dean back by the scruff of his neck, causing the startled boy to let go off Ginny.

Draco let go as well, but didn't pocket his wand, instead keeping it clenched in his hand whilst he stood protectively in front of Ginny, who was routed to the spot with wide eyes. Ron Weasley had yet to make a move.

"Let me at him!" Dean roared, flailing around like a lunatic. *Maybe he should date that Luna girl*, Draco thought casually.

"Calm yourself Mr. Thomas," Professor Flitwick squeaked, whilst Hagrid gave him a little shake. Of course, a little shake to Hagrid was more like a violent tailspin to Dean, and he came out of it a bit dizzy. Draco figured that had more to do with his compliance than anything else as Hagrid marched him out of the door.

"I suggest you get yourselves back up to the castle," Flitwick advised, nodding towards the door, "before we have another scene. I will have a word with Mr. Weasley here."

"Thank you Professor," Ginny mumbled red faced, and Draco allowed her to drag him from the pub. The not so hushed whispers followed them.

It wasn't exactly what Draco had in mind, but it was better than nothing. He was hoping the other Weasley would have started a fight with him. He would have allowed the red haired boy to beat him, further alienating the girl from her family, and pushing her even further into his arms. However, Dean Thomas's outburst ruined those plans. Still, Draco thought he had at least made a good impression on Ginny. Out of the two, he was definitely the saner, not to mention nicer. Either way, Draco decided he better play it up a little.

"I'm sorry Ginny," he said, looking down at the ground in 'shame', "I didn't mean to cause that scene back there, you know that right? I didn't think, I'm so sorry."

"It's okay," Ginny said, lowering her head to meet his eyes, "you weren't at fault. It was that stupid jealous Dean Thomas's fault. I can't believe him. I dumped him ages ago, but he just won't leave me alone. I guess he didn't like seeing me with someone else."

"I don't think it helped that it was me," Draco said dryly.

"That too." Ginny said.

"Anyway," Draco went on, "I'm still sorry. I guess I ruined our date didn't I?"

“No,” Ginny said fiercely, that admirable fire in her eyes returning, “I’m not letting that jealous prick ruin our first date. Let’s go somewhere, away from here. I’m sure we can find somewhere nice and quiet to spend the rest of our date in piece, right?”

“Yeah,” Draco said, “good idea.”

The rest of the date passed quietly. They shared a romantic stroll through the countryside around Hogsmeade, ending up near the Shrieking Shack, and when they eventually returned to Hogwarts it was already late at night. They said goodbye to each other outside the Gryffindor common room, where Ginny gave Draco a long and sensual kiss. Draco walked away with a smirk on his face.

However, tomorrow was a whole new day, and the news of their date had already spread throughout Hogwarts.

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Twenty-Two

The next day dawned early for Ginny. She woke up feeling the most rested she had in a long time, all thoughts and worries concerning the OWL's forgotten, at least for now. Her date with Draco had been every bit as great as she had fantasised, except for the little incident with Dean. She really wanted to slap that idiot boy. However, despite all that (not to mention her concern over Ron's reaction) she still felt amazing. Sure, it was going to be a hassle explaining to everyone why she was dating (am I?) a Slytherin, never mind that that Slytherin was Draco Malfoy, but Ginny didn't care.

Ginny was floating on the wind, flying higher than she had ever before, and all of the world sparkled before her like it had been polished over night by one energized hoard of house elves (or would that be World elves?). Nothing could dampen her mood. She was dating Draco Malfoy, the sweetest and nicest guy she had ever met.

Ginny wasn't an idiot though, she knew how people would react. It didn't matter though. They didn't know the real Draco Malfoy. Only she did. They could stare at her, laugh at her; they could do whatever they wanted. Ginny didn't care, because she was in love.

With a spring in her step, she bounded down the stairs into the Gryffindor common room, noticing how everyone's eyes immediately darted to her, and not caring. She noticed Dean across the room, sitting with her brother, and smiled at him with a sickeningly sweet smile as he got up and made his way over to her. This time, Ron was behind him.

"Ginny!" he said, pushing past an idling first year, practically knocking the poor kid over. "Explain! Right now!"

"Good Morning to you too," Ginny said pleasantly, still grinning.

"Good...what?" Dean was clearly baffled.

"Move it Dean," Ron said, speaking for the first time, roughly shoving the boy out of the way, "I'll handle this. I've already written to mum. I'm sure she'll love to hear how you've been knocking around with a Malfoy."

"I don't care," Ginny said, "I was going to tell her anyway. I'm not ashamed, you know. I'm dating Draco and if you don't like it then it's just tough luck. Nothing you can say will change my mind."

"You're being stupid," Ron said, going red in the face, "you know that, right? He's just using you. He's a Slytherin Ginny - they're all evil."

Ginny laughed. "Right, whatever you say."

"I know!" Dean said, coming forward again. "I know what's going on. She's been put under Imperious or something, no - a love potion. Yeah, I bet it's a love potion."

"Do you two actually hear the words coming out of your mouths?" Ginny asked, squinting at them mockingly. "I'm tired of this already. See you."

And she brushed past them, ignoring their shouted retorts and orders to 'get back here this instant!' without a thought. She exited the common room and started down towards the Great Hall.

However, as she traversed Hogwarts, she began to notice that every student she passed seemed to stare at her avidly. It wasn't all that surprising, but surely they had something better to be doing? Sighing, resigned to the fact she would have to put up with their eyes for a good part of the future, she entered the Great Hall.

The moment she entered the huge dinning area all eyes turned to her, almost in synchronization. *Jeez, was there a memo?* She thought sarcastically.

The Slytherin table was a mixture of gleeful leering (from the males) and angry glares (from the females). The Ravenclaw table was regarding her as if she was an interesting puzzle. Hufflepuff just looked confused. Ignoring them, she started towards the Gryffindor table, which for the most part seemed to be ignoring her.

She noticed Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil sitting close with their heads bent towards each other, pointing at her rather obviously. One of the girls she shared her dorm room with was giving her a scandalised look, like she was a piece of trash that the wind had

blown over. Ignoring her, Ginny cast her eyes around the table, looking for a safe place to sit.

"You can sit here if you want," a soft-spoken voice said.

Ginny startled, having not noticed the person sitting just behind her, and turned around to regard the slightly bushy haired girl she knew was called Hermione Granger.

She knew who she was, of course. Hermione was the smartest girl in her year - even Ginny knew that, but aside from that, Ginny didn't really know all that much about her. She was a very isolated girl. She always had been, as far as Ginny knew. Either way, Ginny smiled and sat down, grateful.

"Thank you," she said, genuinely.

"Your welcome," Hermione replied.

"You don't mind sitting next to trash?" Ginny asked jokingly, jerking a finger down the table at the few students still looking at her as if she was a big clump of dirt.

Hermione laughed dryly. "No, I don't mind," she said.

"You'd think that's what I was," Ginny went on, "the way they look at me, huh?"

"I guess," Hermione replied, "either way, it doesn't matter. They're the ones loosing out. You seem like a nice girl to me."

"Thank you."

"You're really dating Draco Malfoy then?" Hermione asked hesitantly, after a brief pause.

"Yeah," Ginny said loudly, giving everyone around her a significant look, "I am dating Draco Malfoy."

"Do you mind if I ask why?" Hermione continued, still hesitant.

"Hey," Ginny said, smiling at Hermione, "don't be afraid to ask. I know it sounds weird, but you don't really know the real Draco. No one here does, except me."

"I'm sure Harry does," Hermione said.

"Harry?" Ginny gave Hermione a quizzical look. "On first name basis with Potter, are you?"

"What?" Hermione flushed, shaking her head frantically. "No way. Of course I'm not. How could I be?"

"Merlin," Ginny gasped, amazed, before leaning forward and whispering, "You are, aren't you? How?"

"I'm not," Hermione mumbled, embarrassed.

"Don't lie," Ginny said, still whispering, "I can tell. Why else would you have gone all defensive like that? It's a dead give away. So spill, how do you know Potter?"

"No one is supposed to know," Hermione whispered, ducking her head down, "so please don't tell anyone, okay?"

"Course," Ginny said, shrugging, "you think I'd subject anyone else to this?"

Ginny nodded her head in the general direction of everyone else.

"I hope not," Hermione said, smiling faintly, "I understand what Harry was saying now. I don't think I could cope if it came out that we were...dating."

Ginny eyes bugged out. *Dating?* She thought. *She's dating Harry Potter?*

"Dating?" she whisper shouted, eyes wide. "You're dating Harry Potter?"

"Yes," Hermione admitted, blushing.

“Wow,” Ginny said, emphatically. “We need to get out of here,” she nodded towards the double doors leading to the entrance hall, “so we can go girl talk. Come on.”

“Okay,” Hermione said with a nod, getting up and leaving her forgotten potato pie behind.

They spent the rest of the morning talking about their respective boyfriends, comparing notes, so to speak. It was the first time Hermione really had a girl friend to talk with, and as the talking progressed, she grew more and more open and confident with Ginny.

It was the start of a great friendship.

(--)

Harry was following Blaise, heading towards Horace Slughorns dungeon classroom, and to his first Slug Club meeting. It was a pain in the ass, but he had to do it. He hadn't made any progress in getting the memory, so maybe if he played along with old Sluggy, he would be able to convince the Potions Master to give him the unaltered memory.

“So how come you changed your mind?” Blaise asked, turning around and walking backwards so he could talk to Harry.

“Figured I might as well try it out,” Harry said half heartedly, as if it was all just a whim of his.

“I guess,” Blaise agreed, “but to be honest, it really is a pile of shit. I only come because of that hot little Ravenclaw minx Grogen. Damn she has a fine tits.” Blaise blew out his breath in a whistle, and then smirked. “What do you think?”

“About?” Harry asked.

“Are you even listening?” Blaise laughed. “I'm talking about Grogen's fine tits and all you can do is stare at dust motes?”

Harry shrugged and Blaise laughed again, turning around and walking normally again. A few seconds passed.

"I prefer ass," Harry said, deadpan.

Blaise cracked up, laughing like a hyena.

"You're one weird guy," Blaise wheezed, "you know that?"

"I do now," Harry said.

Blaise just shook his head again and continued to lead them down the corridor.

"It's a pity we can't drag Malfoy with us," Blaise commented, "that'd be classic. But I doubt Sluggy would let a Death Eater's son into one of his little meetings, huh?"

"Probably not," Harry agreed.

"Well," Blaise pulled himself up to his full height and straightened his robes, smirking at Harry, "ready?"

"As I'll ever be," Harry said, and together they stepped into the crowded classroom.

In retrospect, it was amazing the amount of people actually came to these things, but Harry didn't have time to think that now. He was too busy being hailed jovially by Slughorn.

"Well if it isn't *Harry Potter!*" Slughorn bellowed, emphasising the 'Harry Potter' sharply. "Finally decided to take me up on my offer, did you? Oho, of course you did. Couldn't resist, could you?"

"How could I?" Harry replied sarcastically, motioning to the amassed students and the horribly tacky decorations Slughorn had summoned up, but the sarcasm was lost on Slughorn, who just laughed good-naturedly and slapped Harry on the back.

Blaise sniggered.

"And Mr. Zabini," Slughorn said, turning his attention to the dark skinned wizard, "so good to see you again."

“Yeah,” Blaise said dismissively, his eyes searching the crowd, landing on a rather large breasted seventh year girl (Harry assumed this was Grogan, whoever that was), “if you’ll excuse me.”

And he disappeared into the crowd.

“Strange kid,” Slughorn said, watching Blaise leave with a puzzled look, “comes here every meeting, but all he does is sit and stare into space. He must have issues, poor guy. It’s a shame.”

Harry chuckled. “Yeah, such a shame,” again, the sarcasm was lost on Slughorn.

“Well then Harry,” Slughorn said, his voice back to its usual cheerful tone, “let me introduce you to everyone.”

What followed was an agonizing hour for Harry, as he was passed around the room like a large trophy, for everyone to goggle at. Most people didn’t goggle, though, but rather viewed him with their usual precariousness. Slughorn didn’t seem to notice.

When it was over, Harry tried to corner Slughorn and question him about the memory, but the old codger obviously saw him coming and quickly called an end to the meeting, practically shoving everyone out the door and bolting it shut behind him.

Outside the door, Harry sighed, running a hand through his hair in irritation.

“Well that was a waste of time,” he muttered.

“Should have joined me,” Blaise said with a smirk, “I certainly didn’t waste my time.”

Harry just shook his head and started back towards the Slytherin dungeons, Blaise trailing after him with a wistful look on his face.

When they arrived back at the dungeons they found Draco sitting alone by the fire, the common room empty around him. Obviously, everyone else had gone to bed. Harry looked at his watch, noticing for the first time that it was rather late. Sighing again at the wasted

night, he plopped down across from his silver haired best friend. Blaise stood behind Draco's chair and leant over, quickly putting his arms around Draco and whispering breathlessly in his ear:

"Oh Draco, come to bed with me?" Blaise did his best to imitate Pansy Parkinson, and pulled it off rather successfully.

Draco startled, having been lost in his own world, and jumped out of the chair, clapping Blaise around the head.

"Fuck off prat," Draco snapped, flushing.

Harry smiled slightly at the exchange, but then he remembered something he had been meaning to ask Draco about and his face turned serious again.

"Hey Draco," Harry said, getting the blondes attention.

"Huh?" Draco turned his attention away from the cackling Blaise to Harry.

"I heard you're dating Ginny Weasley now," Harry said, raising an eyebrow, "that true?"

Draco shrugged. "I guess. "

He obviously didn't want to talk about, so Harry decided to press him for more information. After all, it wasn't every day Draco decided to date a Gryffindor.

"So what's the catch?" Harry asked, propping his feet up. "I mean, I didn't think I'd ever see the day you'd date a Gryffindor, much less a Weasley."

Blaise was still laughing in the background, but he grew silent to listen to the exchange.

"It's none of your business Potter," Draco said testily, his cheeks turning even redder. That was never a good sign with Draco.

"Oh come on," Blaise intoned, grinning from ear to ear, "why don't you tell him Draco?"

"Shut your mouth *Zabini!*" Draco warned.

"Come on Draco," Harry said, becoming more worried by the second. "What's going on?"

"It's a bet," Blaise said suddenly, leaning over and ruffling Draco's hair annoyingly, "or rather, the consequence of a bet." And he burst out laughing again.

"Blaise you fucking bastard!" Draco tried to leap over the chair to get at the laughing Blaise Zabini, but Harry had grabbed his arm, preventing him.

"Calm down Draco," Harry said, and - motioning to the chair - continued, "sit down."

"Not until I kill that ugly fucker." Draco said, glaring at the still laughing boy.

"Blaise -shut it," Harry said forcefully, and Blaise instantly shut up, but he looked slightly put out, "Draco, sit."

Draco sat down with a sigh and Harry let go of his arm.

"So this is a bet then?" Harry asked, trying to sort everything out in his head.

"Sort of," Draco admitted. "I lost to Mr. Pissing-his-pants-Zabini here and therefore had to seduce whichever Gryffindor he chose. He chose the Weaslette, so..."

"You didn't tell him the good part," Blaise piped in, placing his elbows on either side of Draco's head and leaning forward, "so I'll do it for you. She completely shot him down, over and over again. It was kinda sad, really, but anyway, now Draco is going to get his own back. He's finally convinced the girl that he's a 'nice sweet boy' and as soon as he gets her in the sack, he's going to break up with her in public

and totally humiliate her.” Blaise cracked up like it was the funniest thing he’d ever heard.

Harry frowned. “He’s not serious, is he?”

“Yeah,” Draco said, his eyes narrowing, “the little bitch deserves it for turning me down, right? I mean, come on, she’s below me and she has the nerve to treat me like I’m dirt? She’s a bitch Harry. She deserves this.”

“Don’t do it Draco,” Harry said, sighing.

“What?” Draco and Blaise asked at the same time.

“You’ll just end up causing trouble,” Harry said, “and most likely, it’ll come back to bite you in the ass.”

“You sound like a Gryffindor,” Blaise accused, “it’s not good on you. Come on Harry, it’s just fun.”

Harry shrugged. “I can’t tell you what to do,” he said, “but that’s my advice. Don’t do it. It’s up to you to decide now Draco.”

Blaise just shook his head and left, heading towards the sixth year dorm room. Harry sat up; his feet back on the ground now, leaning forward.

“Listen Draco,” Harry said, “don’t listen to Zabini. He’s got a few screws loose, I’m sure. Just forget this whole thing.”

“I can’t,” Draco said, his fist clenching his robes into scuffs.

“Look,” Harry said, meeting Draco’s eyes with his own, “Ginny Weasley has always been nice to me. While everyone else thinks I’m a loony just waiting to blow up and become the next Voldemort, she doesn’t. I’m not going to act like I know the girl, but from what I’ve seen, she’s a nice girl, and she doesn’t deserve that Draco.”

Harry stood up and left then, letting Draco think it over. He’d done all he could; it was up to his best friend to figure it out now. If he’d have

stayed around and listened, he would have heard the last words out of Draco's mouth before he got up and followed:

"I know."

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Twenty-Three

The following weekend found the Slytherin Quidditch team doing aerial battle with Ravenclaw. Harry was up high, searching for the Snitch in his usual manner. His opponent Seeker, Cho Chang, was hovering close by, obviously marking him. It was her usual tactic, and Harry wasn't worried. His Firebolt and skill would easily leave her in the dust, so to speak, once he spotted the Snitch.

At the Keeper post, Draco was doing terrible. He had already let in more goals than he cared to admit, but he just couldn't keep his mind on the game. His eyes kept finding themselves locked on a particular head of flaming red hair, Ginny Weasley, who was sitting next to a girl with bushy brown hair called Hermione Granger, another Gryffindor. On top of that, his mind kept wondering, as it seemed to always do these days, onto the problem of whether or not he should get his revenge on the girl who had humiliated and crushed his pride. Thus, Ravenclaw was winning.

Funnily enough, the person commentating made this rather odd game of Quidditch even odder: Luna Lovegood. She kept drawing attention to Draco's dismal save record in a way that, had Draco been paying more attention, would have seriously irked him. The crowd seemed to find it highly amusing though, especially the Gryffindors. Despite all this, Draco just couldn't find the desire to care. That in itself was rather out of character for him, giving even more credence to how turned about the 'Ginny problem' (as he had dubbed it) was making him.

In the end, regardless of the Slytherin teams (minus Harry) dismal effort, they still won the match. Harry managed to snatch the snitch before Cho Chang, as was usual, ending the game before Ravenclaw could get enough of a lead for it to count. The crowd groaned at the end, even though it had become expected every time Harry played that he'd catch the snitch. They at least hoped Slytherin would lose on points.

Afterward, in the changing rooms, Harry was treated to the usual post game backslapping by the rest of the team, which he shrugged off irritably. He quickly got dressed, watching out of the corner of his eye

as Draco did the same. Draco left the changing rooms in a huff, obviously frustrated by something. Harry had an idea what was bothering him, but decided to let the Malfoy figure it out by himself. Harry left the changing rooms shortly after that and headed to the Library, not surprised to find Hermione and Neville waiting for him.

"Hi Harry," Hermione greeted, leaning up to give him a quick kiss as he sat next to her.

"Hey," Neville added.

"Hey guys," Harry returned, leaning his head back against the chair and letting out a relaxing sigh.

"You okay sweetie?" Hermione asked.

Harry looked up, cocking an eyebrow, ignoring Neville's muffled snigger. "Sweetie?"

"I'm trying it out," Hermione answered, grinning.

"Do you have to do it in public?" Harry said, motioning to the snickering Neville.

"Yes," Hermione said, leaning over the table to swat ineffectually at Neville, thus making him shut up.

"Okay..." Harry said, resigned.

"You were great today." Hermione said, changing the subject.

"Yeah," Neville said, leaning forward. "You kicked butt, and won me five Galleons. Seamus will make a bet with anyone over anything." He was grinning when he said this, flashing one of the gold Galleons over the top of the table cheekily.

"Glad I could help," Harry said, running a hand through his wet messy hair.

"Are you okay?" Hermione asked, batting his hands away and feeling his forehead like a worried mother.

Harry smiled, grabbing her hands and squeezing them lightly. "You're the cutest thing ever," he said, giving one of her hands a little kiss, "and I'm fine. Just a little worried about Draco."

"Oh?" Hermione sounded interested.

Unwilling to go into details, Harry changed the subject, "So Neville, you been practicing that advanced Shield Charm I showed you?"

"Yeah," Neville said, his grin alighting his slightly chubby face, "I think I've got it too. At least, I'm a lot better at it than the last time I showed you. Can you show me some more spells?"

"I'd like too," Harry said, "but we really don't have any place to practice them. I'm surprised we got away with those few spells last time. If Madam Pince found us doing spells back here we'd be thrown out in a second. Not that I'm afraid she'll throw me out, I just like to keep a low profile. If she found us back here doing spells she wouldn't leave me alone for the rest of the year. That would just annoy me."

"Oh," Neville slumped down in his seat, frowning.

"But hey," Harry said, getting the boys attention, "I'll have a look around, try to find a good place to practice."

"Cool," Neville said with a grin, "thanks Harry. Anyway, I have to get going. Ron wants me to help him learn to Apparate. How funny is that - someone wants *me* to help *them*! Ha." And he took off, grabbing his bag and leaving them behind with a cheery wave.

"Wow," Hermione whistled, "I've never seen him that happy. He's really improved since he met you Harry. Thank you."

"Its no problem," Harry said, "he had the talent in him. He just needed confidence."

"Still," Hermione said, leaning her head against his shoulder, "you've done wonders for him."

"It's not entirely without reason," Harry said, "after all, I'm going to need him when I face Voldemort."

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked, pulling back and looking at Harry questioningly.

"Well," Harry regarded her thoughtfully for a moment, then took a deep breath and went on, "okay, I haven't been completely honest with you."

"What?" Hermione's eyes narrowed, her insecurities getting the better of her, making her mind come up with a thousand different ways Harry could have been misleading her, all of them bad, in just a matter of seconds.

"Wait," Harry said, reaching out and stroking her cheek softly, "don't jump to conclusions. I'm sorry I didn't tell you, but I'm sure you'll understand once I do, and I am going to. It's a very important secret, okay? It's so secret only a few people know it in this world, one of them being Dumbledore, okay? I don't know how he'd react to me telling you this, but I don't care. He's kept things from me before, this secret being one of them, so screw him."

"Harry!" Hermione looked indignant, shocked that he could speak like that about a wizard she viewed as almost godlike.

"Hermione," Harry said, sighing, "I know you think Dumbledore is some kind of saint, and that's mostly true, but he's also human and he makes mistakes like everyone else. There are some things that me and Dumbledore will never see eye to eye on, so it created a little rift between us, but don't think I don't respect the man. I do, just not like everyone else seems to, with this Dumbledore can't go wrong mentality."

"I...Okay," Hermione said with sigh, accepting Harry's explanation for now, "but what is it you want to tell me?"

"Not here," Harry said, looking around the mostly empty (especially at the back) Library mistrustfully, "we can be too easily overheard here. Let's go to the chamber, okay?"

“Okay.”

Together, the two teens grabbed their stuff, Hermione stuffing her bag with books and Harry waiting patiently, his own bag slung over his shoulder. When Hermione had finished, they left the Library and Harry led her down the hall, to an out of the way alcove down the corridor. He looked around cautiously, checking for signs of life, and finding none, he raised his wand and hissed in Parsletongue. The wall to the left of them gave in with a crack, moving back and sliding to the side with the sound of stone on stone, grating. Harry led Hermione into the dark passage behind the wall, and when the stone slid back into place behind them, casting them into total darkness, he raised his wand and it lit up with a blindingly bright light. Hermione squinted her eyes against the light, looking down the passageway.

“That’s bright,” she whispered.

Harry chuckled, “Sorry, sometimes I don’t know my own power.”

“It’s this way right?” Hermione continued, pointing left when they reached another secret corridor that led of in two directions, left and right.

“Right you are,” Harry said, taking the lead. “You know, you’re getting to know these tunnels almost as well as me.”

“Well,” Hermione said, and Harry could tell she was smiling just by the sound of her voice, “we do pass through them a lot.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, “it’s easier to get from the Library to the chamber this way, instead of taking the long way around.”

They descended into silence, just walking along, winding their way through the walls of Hogwarts and heading towards Salazar Slytherin’s secret chamber. After a while, Harry reached out and clasped Hermiones hand, and was comforted when she squeezed it. Finally, they reached a dead end, and Harry muttered in Parsletongue again, before the wall slid forward and to the side, revealing the hidden chamber.

Harry stepped inside, dismissing his Lumos, and then helped Hermione out of the dark tunnel with a hand. He dusted her off a little, patting at her shoulders, before doing the same to himself. Hermione smiled at him a touch, before walking over to the couch and sitting down, expecting Harry to follow. He did, sitting across from her on the small table.

“Well?” Hermione pressed impatiently.

Harry couldn't tell if she was angry or nervous, or hell, maybe it was a bit of both. Whatever it was, it was making her extremely impatient. Not wanting to anger her further, or to make her worry too much, he took her hands and held them between his, meeting her eyes.

“I'm sure you've asked yourself why Voldemort attacked my parents and myself on that night, right?” Harry started and, not letting her get a word in, he continued. “Well, the answer is simple. You see, before I was born, a prophecy was made. The prophecy said that a child would be born at the end of July and that this child would be marked as Voldemorts equal.” He stopped for a second, to raise the bangs of hair covering his forehead, exposing his scar. “Like this. The prophecy also said that the boy would have a power the, and I'm quoting, ‘Dark Lord knows not’. I don't know what that is, but I'm sure Dumbledore does, he just won't tell me. Anyway, the last thing the prophecy says is that neither me nor Voldemort can live whilst the other survives, meaning, one of us has to kill the other.”

Throughout Harry's speech Hermione's eyes had been getting wider and wider, until finally, once he had finished, tears glistening, she flung herself into him, wrapping her arms around his neck and burying her face into him, sobbing.

“I'm sorry Harry,” she sobbed, sniffing, “so sorry.”

“Hey,” Harry said, rather taken aback, but nonetheless rubbing soothing circles on her back and nuzzling her head with his own, “don't worry about it. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner.”

“Oh,” Hermione blubbered, “don't worry about that. I'm sorry, I didn't know. It's awful Harry, I'm so sorry.” She seemed to be unable to say

anything other than that, so Harry just let her be, giving her time to get it out of her system.

When she finally had calmed down, she pulled back, locking eyes with Harry. She sniffed once, gave him a weak smile, and then kissed him softly on the lips. Harry could feel what was left of her tears against his own cheeks, but didn't care. He gently moved her backwards and kissed away her tears, before returning her weak smile with one of his own.

"Don't worry Hermione," he said, "I won't lose. I've been preparing for this since I learnt I was a wizard and I'm not going to lose. Especially not after I found you."

"But how Harry?" Hermione said with another sniff. "Vol-Volde-Voldemort," she paused, getting her breath back, and giving Harry another smile, "he's too powerful Harry. I know you're amazing, but he's..."

"Overestimated," Harry finished for her, "just like Dumbledore is. Sure, they're great wizards, but they're just men. Even though Voldemort sure doesn't look it, he is. Hell, he's less than a man. I won't lose. Besides, that's why Dumbledore is giving me these lessons," Harry went on, hoping to appease her and make her feel better, even though he himself thought the lessons were a joke, "so I'm prepared to face him."

"I guess," Hermione murmured, "I guess your right." Then, as if she was hit by a sudden lightning strike, she went on: "Harry, you still haven't got that memory from Professor Slughorn have you?"

"Erm, no," Harry admitted, "not yet."

"Then," Hermione gave him a huge grin, "I want you to use my Felix Felicis."

"What?" Harry shook his head. "No, you won it fair and square Hermione. It's yours."

"Yeah," Hermione said, "it is. And I want you to use it to get that memory. Please Harry, you need it so much more than me."

"I...Fine," Harry said, "but only a little bit. I'll give it a try."

"Good," Hermione said, giving him another soft kiss, "because I don't know what I'd do if something happened to you. If I can help, I want to. In anyway I can."

"I know," Harry said, returning the kiss, "I know."

"Thank you Harry," Hermione murmured against his lips.

"No," Harry whispered, "thank you."

They fell silent again, just enjoying the feeling of being in each other's arms. Somehow, Harry wasn't sure how, they ended up spooning on the couch. Harry's back was to the back of the green sofa and Hermione was curled up in his arms. Harry had his own arms around her, idly stroking one of hers. Harry looked down at Hermione, who had a content smile on her face, and felt a mirroring smile bloom on his face as well. At that moment, Harry probably wouldn't have cared if the world were coming to an end, just as long as he could stay here, with Hermione in his arms, forever.

However, the comfortable silence that had descended over the couple was eventually broken when Hermione spoke:

"Harry?" she spoke softly.

"Mmm?" He mumbled, too comfortable to form words.

"You never really answered my question," Hermione said, opening her eyes and turning in his arms to face him, "what does Neville have to do with you facing V-Voldemort?"

"Oh," Harry smiled, moving forward slightly and kissing her forehead, "nothing much. Only two babies were born at the end of July that Voldemort could have picked to mark as his equal, although he didn't know about that, after all he only heard part of the prophecy. I bet you can guess who the other baby was, can't you?"

"Neville."

“Bingo,” Harry replied, “and that’s why I want him on my side. Despite the fact Voldemort didn’t mark him, I figure he has to have the power in him, at least somewhat. Whatever that power is.”

“It makes sense, I guess,” Hermione said thoughtfully.

“I thought so,” Harry said, “anyway, enough about that. I just want to relax with my beautiful girl.”

“So I should go?” Hermione replied, mock serious.

Harry chuckled and was rewarded with one of Hermione’s cute giggles and beaming smiles. He leant forward and gave her the deepest, most passionate kiss he could. Pulling back, he said:

“You’re the best, you know that, right?”

“Yup,” Hermione continued to beam at him.

“Come here,” Harry pulled her close and again they kissed, but this time neither wanted to break apart, and the kiss continued.

Harry’s hands started wandering, moving down her lithe frame and landing at the curve of her hip. Deciding to explore a bit and test the waters, he went further, his hands cupping Hermiones bottom gently. She giggled into his lips but made no attempt to stop him, so he let them rest, enjoying the feel of her soft flesh through the fabric of her robe.

For a teenaged relationship, they had both been very respectful of the other. Harry didn’t want to push things too far and ruin it, so he curbed any teenaged hormones and desires he’d been feeling. Hermione, on the other hand, was dreadfully shy and unsure of herself, so she was a little afraid of making any big moves. Thus, they had hardly done anything more than kissing, with slight tongue action, during the course of their relationship.

This was the first time Harry had decided to push things a little, but both felt it was long overdue. Hermione seemed encouraged by Harry’s actions, and her own hands started exploring, pressing

against his chest and reaching around to his back, feeling his toned muscles through his robe.

Harry grinned into her mouth and turned slightly, shifting them around until Hermione was lying underneath him. He smirked down at her and finally pulled back, leaving her gasping slightly for breath beneath him and watching him with desire filled eyes. He grabbed his robe and pulled it over his head, tossing the offending garment aside. He was now only wearing a green muggle shirt with the sleeves rolled up and black corduroy pants.

Hermione sat up a bit, giving him a little peck on the lips as she did, before pulling back and removing her own robe. Harry watched her, saw her nervous gulp, and decided to make the next move for her. He pressed his weight down on her lightly, making her lie back on the couch, and began to kiss her deeply again. His hands went to her waist instantly, teasing the hem of her blouse. When she made no protest, he moved them underneath and explored the soft planes of her abdomen.

Hermione shivered in response and started to explore as well, copying Harry. She moved her hands to his shirt and slipped them underneath, feeling his toned muscles underneath her fingers, softly brushing his skin. She giggled again when she felt the soft tree of hairs around his naval and started playing with them, making Harry smile into the kiss.

Hermione took a deep breath, breaking away, staring up at him with shinning chocolate eyes. He knew what was coming.

"I love you Harry," she breathed softly.

"I know," he replied, and kissed her again.

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Twenty-Four

Feeling incredibly lucky, Harry was making his way towards Horace Slughorns office, holding a slightly emptier bottle of Felix Felicis. He had only taken a mouth full, confident that he could get the job done in a few hours, and also unwilling to use up more of Hermione's rightfully earned luck potion.

He had no idea how he was actually going to get the unaltered memory, but with Felix Felicis on his side, he was sure that if he just followed his instincts, he'd pull it off. So as soon as he took the mouth full of potion, he was off, heading towards Slughorns office.

The rest of the school would probably be getting ready for bed, but Harry was somehow sure that Slughorn would be in his office. He sped up, wanting to be certain he caught the old Professor before he left for his own quarters. As the dungeon door came into view, Harry slowed down, until he was walking without making a single sound. He stopped outside the door and peered through the tiny crack between the door and wall.

Slughorn was sitting behind his desk, a bottle of Firewhisky clutched in his hand, his head lolling against the back of the chair. He looked terrible and half asleep. Had he been drinking? Most likely, Harry figured, judging by his appearance and the bottle of Firewhisky in his hand. *Thank you Felix*, Harry thought.

Smiling to himself, Harry slowly opened his door and stepped into the dim light of the classroom. Slughorn didn't seem to notice him enter.

"Hello Professor," Harry said, getting the old wizards attention.

Slughorn jumped, his fat belly quivering under his robes and spilling a large amount of Firewhisky on the floor.

"Harry?" he slurred, surprised. "What are you doing here?"

"I was just passing by," Harry lied, knowing it was the right thing to do, "and I saw the light on. What are you still doing here?"

If Slughorn had been any more cognisant he might have questioned why Harry was out and about so late, but instead the old wizard just nodded in acceptance and answered:

"To be honest," Slughorn said, suppressing a belch, "something has been on my mind lately. A decision I made, a while ago. A mistake, I think."

Bingo.

"The Horcruxes, sir?" Harry asked.

"Now," Slughorn attempted to draw himself up to his full height, but evidently got a little dizzy and just sat back down instead, sighing, "Now Harry, I thought I told you not to ask about that anymore."

"I know Professor," Harry said, "but I have too. I need your help Professor."

"Oho," Slughorn wobbled, "you need my help. You want to follow in *his* footsteps, do you? No, I won't, not again."

"Sir," Harry said, meeting the old man's eyes, "does it look like I want to follow in Voldemort's footsteps? What I'm asking you for is what's going to help bring him down. I'm not an idiot sir, I know you told him about these Horcruxes and that - whatever they are - they somehow contribute to his power. You feel guilty for it, that's obvious. Why else would you be drowning your sorrows in Firewhisky? This is your chance to right the wrong, sir. Please give me the memory."

Slughorn sighed. "It won't do any good," he said, "even if I did give it to you, how will that help? What are *you* going to do against You Know Who? I understand how you feel my boy. It must really hurt, knowing he robbed you of your parents. Your mother, she was a brilliant witch. That's what I regret the most."

"Then help me," Harry said, "and I'll make him pay. You're right - my mother was brilliant. And you know what, my father was powerful. But me, I top them both. I'm not being arrogant, it's just fact. I'm the only person who can stop Voldemort, but like I said, I need your help."

"You really think you stand a chance?" Slughorn asked, squinting up at Harry through glazed eyes.

"I know I do," Harry said confidently.

Slughorn sighed, but pulled out his wand and pressed it to his temple, summoning up the memory as a long thread of silver, which he dangled of his wand into an empty bottle on his desk. He corked it and shoved it across the table to Harry, who snatched it up.

"If you think it will help," Slughorn said softly, "then I hope you're right."

"Trust me sir," Harry said, pocketing the bottle.

Slughorn just nodded, letting his head fall against the arm rest, his eyes closed. As Harry left the dungeon classroom, he heard the man's rattling snore and smiled. Slughorn wouldn't remember a thing in the morning.

(--)

In what can only be called great timing, Dumbledore summoned Harry to his office only two days after Harry had acquired the real memory from Slughorn. So after the feast on Monday night, Harry made his way up to the Headmaster's chamber, finding Dumbledore waiting for him behind his desk.

"Ah Harry," Dumbledore greeted him in his usual manner, eyes twinkling, "perfect timing. Lemon drop?"

"No thanks," Harry said, sitting down across from the wizened wizard and placing Slughorn's real memory (bottled up) on Dumbledore's desk.

"So you managed to get the memory I see," Dumbledore commented, leaning forward and picking it up.

"Of course," Harry said.

Dumbledore held the bottle up to the light and examined the silvery liquid through squinted eyes. He smiled, his wrinkled face wrinkling further.

“Wonderful,” he said, standing up instantly. “Well done Harry.”

“Whatever - so are you going to tell me what this is all about yet?” Harry asked, trying to mask his impatience. He didn’t do very well, after all Dumbledore always seemed to be able to read him like an open book, even when most others wouldn’t have had a clue what Harry was thinking or feeling.

Dumbledore chuckled. “Patience is a virtue Harry,” he said, pulling out his Pensive. By it’s side were two small vials of silvery liquid – more memories.

“Yeah,” Harry said, standing up and approaching the circular basin, “one I don’t have.”

“I think we both know that’s not true,” Dumbledore said, smiling at him, “after all, you’ve been able to put up with my lessons so far, haven’t you? I’m aware of how frustrated you must feel, but I’m glad to tell you that all of that will be absolved tonight.”

“Then let’s get on with it,” Harry said, placing his hands on the side of the basin and looking in at the swirling contents.

“Indeed,” Dumbledore agreed, placing Slughorns memory to one side and picking up one of the other vials, “I think we’ll begin with this one. Professor Slughorns memory can wait until last, I think.”

He poured the silvery contents into the Pensive and then together they plunged into the memory. Harry would have liked to have viewed Slughorns memory first, incredibly curious about Horcruxes as he was, but knowing that he would - by the end of the night - finally find out, he was able to remain patient.

Harry watched the two other memories Dumbledore had to show him with only marginal interest, still not really knowing why Dumbledore insisted on showing him these seemingly insignificant looking memories. He watched as Riddle flattered Hepzibah Smith and

practically gushed over Hufflepuffs cup and Slytherins locket. Then he watched the memory in which Riddle, now looking a lot more like the Voldemort Harry was used to, asked Dumbledore for the Defence Against the Dark Arts job.

Finally, they got to the memory Harry was really interested in, the one in which the truth about Horcruxes would be found. Harry watched with growing interest, and dread, as Slughorn told Tom Riddle all about Horcruxes, how you had to split your soul by murdering someone and then affixing it to an object, thus creating a Horcrux. He was shocked at the mere thought of splitting your soul into seven pieces, but when Tom asked about it, he wasn't all that surprised. Finally, they left the memory behind, and Harry no longer needed Dumbledore to explain why they had been viewing all those seemingly random memories.

"So Voldemort has split his soul," Harry said, speaking before Dumbledore, "and created Horcruxes using those objects – Hufflepuffs Cup and Slytherins locket."

"Very perceptive of you Harry," Dumbledore answered, "and quite correct. Though I fear he created more than just those two."

"The ring?" Harry asked, casting a glance at the seemingly harmless object lying on Dumbledores desk. "What else?"

"Well," Dumbledore said, taking a seat behind his desk again, "as I said, we can only speculate now. Though I suspect the snake Nagini may be one as well."

"So that means the ring, the locket, the cup and the snake are Horcruxes," Harry said thoughtfully, "or at least, we suspect."

"Also," Dumbledore held up a hand, "I suspect the diary you destroyed in your second year was also a Horcrux. In fact, that is what sparked my interest in researching all this."

"So that's five Horcruxes," Harry said, "meaning, two more exist. Or is it one more? And then Voldemort?"

“That’s one more Harry,” Dumbledore confirmed, “and, as you put it, then Voldemort.”

“Any idea what the other one is?” Harry asked with curiosity.

“I suspect it is either an item with some significance to Godric Gryffindor or Rowena Ravenclaw,” Dumbledore answered, “most likely Ravenclaw. The only item with some relevance to Gryffindor is the sword you used to slay the Basilisk.” Dumbledore motioned towards the jewelled sword encased behind him.

“But you really have no idea what?” Harry asked.

“Correct,” Dumbledore said, “but as I have already stated, all of what I have told you is just speculation. For all we know, Nagini may not actually be a Horcrux, but just a very intelligent and loyal snake.”

“Right,” Harry said.

“However,” Dumbledore went on, “I think I am close to discovering the location of one of the Horcruxes. I would like for you to join me when I am sure.”

“Really?” Harry couldn’t help but be surprised. That was certainly not what he had expected.

“Of course,” Dumbledore said.

“Count me in,” Harry said eagerly. He was finally going to be treated like an adult.

“Splendid,” Dumbledore stood up abruptly, “well, I think that will do for tonight. I shall contact you again if I have any new information. Until then, don’t forget to keep studying.”

Harry laughed, standing as well. “Sure,” he said, walking towards the door. He stopped with his hand on the handle, turning to look back at Dumbledore. “Thanks sir, for treating me like I’m not some incompetent kid.”

“I have all the faith in the world in you Harry,” Dumbledore told him, smiling.

Harry just nodded and left.

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Twenty-Five

It was a warm Monday evening and Harry and Neville were currently on their way to a secret room Harry had found during his fifth year. He had heard about the place from Dumbledore, in a rather odd moment, overhearing the Headmaster make a passing comment during the Feast at the Yule Ball. Afterwards, due to his desire to know every tiny section of Hogwarts, he had searched for the place, and finally found it in his fifth year. The room was called the Room of Requirement, and as its namesake suggested, the room was whatever you required at the particular time you used it. In this case, it would be a training room.

Harry and Neville were alone, as Hermione and Draco were currently taking their Apparition tests. Harry and Neville would have to wait until they turned seventeen, so they had decided to make use of the alone time to train. Harry would have taken Neville to Slytherin's chamber, but he didn't feel comfortable sharing that part of himself with Neville quite yet.

As they climbed the stairs to the seventh floor, Neville spoke:

"Hey Harry, do you think I should go on a diet?"

"Why?" Harry asked, trying to keep his amusement under control.

"Well," Neville said, hedging, "its just...most guys our age aren't, you know, fat."

Harry chuckled. "You're not fat," he said, and before Neville could argue back, Harry pointing to a space on the wall just down the hall, "here we are."

"Huh?" Neville blinked at the wall, then looked at Harry. "You sure? It just looks like a wall to me."

"I'm sure," Harry said with a smile, "watch."

Harry walked up and down the corridor, passing the space on the wall he had pointed to, thinking 'we need a place to train' over and over again. Then, out of nowhere, a door appeared, shimmering into view.

“Woah,” Neville gasped.

“Come on,” Harry opened the door and entered the room, followed closely by a still awe struck Neville.

“You know,” Neville began, “you see a lot of amazing things as a wizard, but that was just, woah.”

“Yeah that was pretty woah,” Harry agreed sarcastically, tapping Neville lightly on the arm to show he was joking and closing the door.

“Seriously though,” Neville went on, “Harry, don’t you think I’m a bit too fat for my good? That’s what my grandmother always says.”

“You’re not fat,” Harry reiterated, “maybe a little chubby, but there’s nothing wrong with that - as long as you’re happy. Are you?”

“I don’t know,” Neville went on, surprised to find a chair appear before him when he really wanted to sit down and quickly taking said seat, “you see, I’ve been thinking a lot since I met you. I’m tired of people thinking I’m some dumb almost squib loser. I know I’m not, you showed me that. I never knew I could do some of the stuff you showed me, but I can. I’m doing things I never thought I’d master and considering things I never even knew existed. But, that’s not all there is to life, you know?”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked, copying Neville and taking a seat.

“Well,” Neville went red, staring at his feet, “it’s...I’ve never really had anyone to talk with, about this stuff.”

Harry had an idea what Neville was trying to get at, so he decided to put the boy out of his discomfort. “You mean girls?”

“Uh,” Neville blanched, “Erm...I...yeah. It’s just the only girl I ever really knew or considered was Hermione. She’s really great, you know, and I thought, I might have a chance with her. But I don’t. She only cares about you. I asked myself why and then realised that’s pretty stupid. There are loads of reasons why she’d like a guy like you and why no one would even consider a guy like me. You’re smart and funny and you have that cool mysterious thing going for you and, well,

I don't mean to sound gay, but you are pretty good looking. Me? I'm just some fat idiot. Or at least that's what I thought. I don't think that now, but still, I'm not exactly the best looking person on the planet am I?"

"So that's why you think you should go on a diet?" Harry asked for clarification, trying to make sense of Neville's ramblings.

Neville nodded, embarrassed.

"Well," Harry said with a sigh, leaning back into his chair, "it's true that if you went on a diet more girls would consider you, but really, would you want that? You'd be constantly thinking, 'is this girl only going out with me because I'm no longer chubby'? Believe it or not, there are some girls out there who don't care what you look like. Hermione, for example - you're right, she probably would have considered you had you not been friends so long. But she isn't the only girl, Neville. You just have to be patient, and you'll find the right one. Whether you're chubby or skinny. Merlin, you could probably look like cross dressing version of Umbridge and someone would like you."

Neville made a face, but then cracked up.

"I don't think so," he said, between gasps of laughter.

"Yeah," Harry said thoughtfully, "maybe that was pushing it." He grinned at Neville, who grinned back.

"Hermione was right about you," Neville said, suddenly getting serious, "you really are a good guy."

"Don't tell anyone," Harry stage whispered, "you'll ruin my 'cool mysterious thing'."

Neville started laughing again.

(--)

Draco and Hermione both passed their apparition tests and both of them gave Harry a rundown of what the test involved, so that he'd be

better prepared for his own when the time came. Not that he really needed the help; he was confident he would pass with flying colours.

The weeks went by normally. Harry noticed Draco become more and more quiet and isolated. He would disappear for hours, probably spending time with Ginny Weasley, and Harry could only hope that he was really rethinking his whole payback idea. Hermione had confessed to him that she had let it slip to Ginny (who she had apparently become friends with recently) that the two of them were dating. Harry had sighed, but he couldn't really get mad at her for that, and surprisingly, he wasn't. He was starting to accept the fact that sooner or later his relationship with Hermione was going to come out. He just hoped it went smoother for them than it did for Draco and Ginny.

Along with confessing to him her little slip-up, Hermione had told Harry that Ginny really cared about Draco. She asked him if Draco was really being serious dating Ginny, and for the first time, Harry was forced to lie to her. He told her he didn't know. He just couldn't admit to her that it was all a joke set up to humiliate the poor fifth year. Harry was still hoping that Draco would reconsider.

In addition to Hermione questioning Draco's motive, Harry was surprised when Neville had cornered him and drilled him on the notorious Slytherin's intentions. It seemed Neville was also very protecting of the youngest Weasley, but for what reason, Harry wasn't sure.

Dumbledore had yet to contact Harry with further information on his Horcrux hunt, and Harry was beginning to wonder if the Headmaster had lied to him about wanting to take him along just to placate him.

Professor Slughorn, as Harry had suspected, didn't seem to remember their little conversation whilst the old wizard was drunk, and consequently, had an idea he had given the true memory to Harry. He treated Harry as he always did.

Harry had decided to take up a more active role in trying to find out the identity of the Junior Death Eater, who had been mysteriously silent these last few months. He hadn't made any more attempts, if that was what it really was, since the attack on Katie Bell. Harry was

beginning to suspect it might have just been a prank set up by someone to get even with the Bell girl, for whatever reason. But deep down, he didn't really believe that.

He knew something was going on at Hogwarts this year, something under the radar. After all, hadn't Draco told him about his father's words, and the special assignment the older Malfoy wanted to recommend his son for? But then why was the Junior Death Eater being so silent? He hadn't made a move since that first attack. Harry didn't have a clue.

So when he heard the news that Katie Bell had finally returned to Hogwarts, he was particularly enthused. He would finally be able to find out what happened to the girl and who gave her the necklace.

He found the seventh year Gryffindor just outside the Great Hall, talking with a group of her friends. She was nodding enthusiastically, obviously happy to be back. Harry watched, hidden under his Invisibility Cloak. One by one, her friends left her, entering the Great Hall, until she was the only one left. She started to walk away, obviously having something more important to do. Harry didn't care, as long as he got to talk to her alone.

When she finally entered a deserted corridor, Harry pulled off his Cloak and grabbed her arm, pulling her into an alcove. She gasped and turned around with an elbow, attempting to elbow him, but he was faster and ducked. Her eyes widened at the sight of him.

"Calm down," he said, whispering, "I'm not going to hurt you. I just want a word."

"So you felt the need to attack me down a deserted corridor?" Katie asked sarcastically, her eyes flashing angrily.

"I only grabbed your arm," Harry said, rolling his eyes, "I hardly call that attacking. Listen, I just didn't want anyone to see us talking."

"And why would *you* want to talk to *me*?" Katie asked biting. The way she emphasised 'you' and 'me' made it pretty clear to Harry she was part of the group that thought him the next Dark Lord.

"I want to know what happened to you," Harry said, ignoring her disposition for the moment, "the day you touched the necklace."

"Oh?" Katie laughed harshly. "And why would you want to know that? I'd have thought you'd know all about it already, being a Slytherin."

"Well," Harry said, gritting his teeth against her prejudice, "contrary to popular belief, not all Slytherin's are cold blooded killers. That necklace was designed to kill whoever wore it and I think who ever gave it you wanted you to give it to someone important. Say, someone like Dumbledore."

"What?" Katie was startled at hearing this news. Obviously she just thought the attack was done out of spite, or maybe just to get her out of the Quidditch match. Either way, she had no idea how serious it actually was.

"It's very important you tell me what happened," Harry said, "because I think someone in this school is trying to kill Dumbledore. And if that happens, it won't be good. Think about it, with Dumbledore gone, Voldemort has an open shot at Hogwarts."

"You're insane!" Katie said, finally pulling herself out of his grip. "You Know Who is gone. The Ministry said so. No one is trying to kill Dumbledore. You really are a nut job aren't you?"

And she made to leave. Harry sighed, grabbing her arm again, pulling her back into the alcove. She gasped as he slammed her against the wall. She went to yell, but he silenced her with a hand over her mouth. Her terrified eyes looked at him over his hand as she struggled against his stronger grip. He pulled his wand out and her eyes darted to it, tears forming.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, really meaning it, "but you're not exactly giving me a choice here."

He locked eyes with her and then with all his concentration, he plunged in. Images rushed by, flashing before his mind in a blindingly fast rush, so fast that he couldn't make them out. He focuses, slowing them down, until finally they flashed before him at a reasonable pace.

He saw the Three Broomsticks and the girl who had been with Katie on that day, sitting around a table and drinking Butterbeer. He saw Madam Rosmerta. He saw the door to the girl's bathroom, it was opening... and then a bonding flash and then darkness. He went back, trying to find a clear image, but after five minutes of searching, he could find nothing. It was all too jumbled. Nothing concrete - just useless images. He pulled away from Katie's mind and sighed.

Katie's muffled cries brought him back to the present and he looked up at the terrified girl. She had stopped struggling but the tears streaking down her face hadn't stopped. He'd terrified the girl all for nothing. He hated himself, but he had to know.

"I'm sorry," he repeated, then raised his wand, "*Obliviate!*"

Katie slumped down as he let her go, the past half an hour of her memory gone. It was all he could do for her. He didn't want her to remember and he certainly couldn't let her remember, for that matter. She would report him.

Flipping the Cloak over his head, he took off, leaving her in the alcove. She'd wake up soon, a bit disoriented, but otherwise unharmed. That was all he could do.

(--)

Later that day, Harry and Hermione sat in Slytherin's chamber, doing some last minute homework. Hermione had noticed that Harry seemed distracted and withdrawn, but had yet to bring it up with him. She finished her work, signing her name on the top of the parchment and rolling it up. Turning her attention to Harry, she noticed he hadn't written a word in the last half hour. She turned to face him, sitting with one leg curled up on the sofa and one on the floor.

"Harry?" she asked. He didn't seem to hear her, so she repeated herself.

"Huh?" he looked up, blinking. "What is it?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing," Hermione replied, "You seem distracted. Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing," Harry replied, a little too quickly.

"You can't fool me Harry," Hermione said, grinning at him cheekily, trying to cheer him up. It didn't work.

"I'm just thinking," Harry said vaguely.

"Oh," Hermione nodded, "well that will really help me help you."

"What?"

Hermione raised a hand to her mouth, covering an amused smile. Harry was cute when he was confused.

"Harry," she said, shuffling closer and grabbing his hand, "what's bothering you? I've never seen you this preoccupied."

"I..." Harry sighed, defeated. "I did something horrible today."

"What do you mean?" she asked, wondering what could be so horrible to make him feel this bad.

He told her. Hermione was surprised. She had never known him be so upset. He told her how he had violated Katie's mind just to find out the truth and how she had acted towards him. He said he didn't know what upset him the most, the fact that she was that afraid of him, or that his desire to know the truth drove him to violating an innocent girl's mind, and all for nothing.

"Harry," she said, tears in her eyes for him, "come here." She pulled him close, rubbing soothing circles on his back.

She didn't agree with what he had done, but she understood why he'd done it. The fact he felt so guilty about it helped as well.

"Sweetie," she whispered, "don't worry about it. I won't lie to you, I don't think what you did was right, but the fact that you know it wasn't and that you feel bad about it, well, that helps. You just got carried away that's all."

“Yeah,” Harry said into her shoulder, “I guess. I’m really sorry Hermione.”

“I know,” she said, rubbing his back further.

“Do people really view me that way?” Harry asked. “I mean, I knew that people didn’t really trust me, but I never knew they felt that strongly about it. She said I was crazy Hermione. I wouldn’t normally let things like that bother me, but I just realised something. The Ministry, they have the entire wizarding world going around like everything is normal, but it’s not. No one knows the truth. Everyone is so carefree about it, and if we don’t do something soon to prove to them that Voldemort really is back, then it’s going to get them all killed. I’m trying to save them and they think I’m a lunatic. It’s all backwards Hermione.”

Hermione could only murmur her assent.

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Twenty-Six

Whilst Hermione comforted Harry in Slytherins chamber, another Slytherin/Gryffindor exchange was taking place elsewhere in the castle. Draco led Ginny down the seventh floor corridor; heading towards the secret room Harry had shown him back in their fifth year. It was, of course, the Room of Requirement.

"Where are we going Draco?" Ginny asked anxiously.

"It's a surprise," Draco returned, giving her a half smirk, half grin.

"I don't like surprises," Ginny said, seriously. "I have a tendency to end up in a dark and dirty chamber with a scary looking snake."

Draco smiled and said: "Don't worry."

"Easy for you to say."

"You trust me, don't you?" Draco asked.

Ginny nodded.

"Then don't worry," Draco said, coming to a stop, "Besides, here we are."

"Here?" Ginny asked, looking around in confusion.

"Yeah, hang on." Draco said, starting to pace before the door he knew was just waiting to appear. He thought: 'I need a nice quiet romantic place to relax'. After the third time, the Room of Requirement door flickered into view and Ginny gasped.

"Come on," Draco grabbed her hand and pulled her through, into the romantically lit room.

Ginny took in a deep breath again, amazed. The room was lit beautifully, dim lighting with strategically placed candles giving the room the perfect glow, bathing the cushion filled room in a low light. Ginny stepped into the room fully, not caring when the door closed behind her, all nervousness gone. This place was amazing.

“Wow,” Ginny said, then echoed her thoughts, “this place is amazing.”

“Yeah,” Draco said, guiding her to one of the cushions and motioning for her to sit down. She did. “Harry found it in our fifth year. This place can be anything you want it to be, all you have to do is think it. Watch.”

Draco held his hand out and thought: ‘Give me a rose.’

Ginny gasped in wonder again as the rose appeared in Draco’s hand and he twirled it through his fingers perfectly before offering it to her with a charming smirk. She took it, marvelling at its beauty.

“What do you think?” Draco asked, gesturing around them to the room.

“It’s amazing,” Ginny said, “thank you so much for bringing me here. It’s perfect.”

“Just like you,” Draco breathed, sitting in front of her on his knees and leaning forward to capture her lips. She let him, leaning back as well so he fell on top of her, the rose forgotten by her side as she moved both hands up to cradle his face and kiss him back.

They made out like that for a few minutes, just enjoying the feel of each other’s lips and tongues. They forgot all about everything else, just content to explore each other. Ginny removed Draco’s shirt first, baring his lean chest in the dim light. Her cheeks flushed with teenaged passion, as she took in the sight of him, bare-chested before her.

Then she sat up and slowly started to unbutton her muggle blouse. They had both worn muggle clothing for this date, deciding to skip over their usual robes. Ginny unbuttoned herself before him, taking her time, until finally her blouse hung open, exposing the cleavage of her petite breasts.

Draco kissed her again and slowly started to slide the blouse from her shoulders, as if unsure whether he should or not. Ginny let him, finally shucking off the garment herself, so that her bra only covered her

upper body. She smiled at him shyly and leant up to continue the kiss. Draco replied eagerly.

She didn't know what they were doing, but whatever it was, it felt right to Ginny. They kissed for several minutes more and Ginny found herself once again under Draco's body, something hard poking into her thigh. She had an idea what it was, and the thought made her blush.

"Draco," she murmured against his lips, pulling back slightly, "what are we doing?"

"I don't know," he whispered back, kissing her neck now, "what are we doing?"

"I don't..." She fumbled. She had only ever gone as far as kissing a boy before, never anything beyond that. But when she thought about it, she didn't think going further with Draco was a bad thing. It actually felt right.

"We can stop," Draco said, still kissing her neck, but moving towards her ear lobe, "if you want." He took her ear lobe into his mouth and sucked, making Ginny groan. Something about what he was doing was entirely erotic, making her thought process slow considerably. Was she actually considering?

"No," she said, "I don't want to stop."

"Then what do you want?" Draco asked, pulling back now, looking at her with lust filled eyes.

"I..." She paused, lowering her eyes, blushing madly. She raised them again and met his eyes; hers filled with lust as well. "I love you Draco." She said.

"I love you too," he replied.

"Then show me," she said, and closed her eyes.

(--)

The next day dawned bright and early for Ginny and she found herself lying in her bed in Gryffindor tower, staring at the curtains covering her bed with a big, lovesick, goofy grin on her face. Last night had been magical and exactly as she pictured it. Draco was a perfect gentleman with her. She just couldn't stop smiling, no matter how much she tried, but to be honest, she didn't really try all that hard. So what if people looked at her like she was crazy and scary when she descended the steps of the girl's dormitories into the common room. She didn't care.

Ginny made her way down to the common room, ignoring the looks on both Dean Thomas's face and her brother. They had been prickly with her since she had started dating Draco. She smiled and waved at Hermione and Neville before passing out of the common room and heading for the Great Hall. She was going to go give Draco a good morning kiss.

(--)

Draco sat in the Great Hall, listening to Pansy go on and on in his ear, but not really taking in a word she said. Today was the day. He'd finally accomplished his goal and taken Ginny Weasleys virginity and now it was time to break her heart. After all those months, it was finally here. Strangely enough, he felt sick. It certainly didn't help when Blaise strutted his way over and sat down across from him.

"Hey Malfoy," Blaise greeted, blatantly interrupting Pansy, "someone kill your House Elf?"

"No," Draco said, "just preparing myself."

"Preparing yourself?" Blaise asked, puzzled, but then he realised what Draco meant and broke out into a shit eating grin. "So today's the day? You finally screw that prissy Gryffindor?"

"Shut it Blaise," Draco snapped, angry with his friend. He found himself growing angrier and angrier with Blaise these days, but it couldn't be for the reason he suspected, could it? He hadn't fallen for the stupid trollop had he?

"What's up your arse?" Blaise asked, looking put out.

"Just not in the mood," Draco said.

"Well," Blaise said, the enthusiasm back in his voice, "I've got something that will cheer you up." He pointed over Draco's head with a smirk. "Your little girlfriend has arrived."

Draco turned in his seat, catching sight of the flaming red hair he'd grown to love coming right towards him. Hosing down the idiot part of his mind that was trying to insist it was a bad idea, Draco stood up. He was going to do it. Draco never backed down from anything. He wasn't going to start now.

"Hiya Draco," Ginny said brightly, coming to a stop before him and leaning up to kiss him. He stepped back and she paused on her tiptoes, her questioning eyes searching for his. "What's wrong?" she asked, unable to keep the anxiety out of her voice.

"Nothing's wrong," Draco said. He swallowed nervously, planning to crush her with his cocky voice, but when he opened his mouth, the words just wouldn't come. He swallowed again.

"Draco?" Ginny croaked. The Hall had gone deathly silent around them.

"I..." Draco stared at his feet, trying to will his emotions down.

Why can't I do it? He thought, furious with himself. He looked up and saw the tears starting to form in Ginny's eyes, as her puzzlement at his odd behaviour grew. He looked her right in the eye. *Come on Draco, he thought. Do it!*

"We...we're through," he whispered, barely able to get the words out.

Then he ran, fleeing the Great Hall. As he left through the double doors, he heard Blaise start laughing, shouting:

"And that's another one to the list of stupid girls Malfoy has used!"

(--)

Ginny was rooted to the spot, unable to believe what was happening. She could hear the sound of laughter in her ears, but all she could see was Draco walking away from her.

“Hey Weaslette,” she heard someone shout gleefully, “how’s it feel to get dumped?” Then the laughter started again.

She looked up, staring at all the laughing faces of the Slytherins around her. She saw Blaise Zabini and Pansy Parkinson practically rolling the isles, pointing at her and laughing. The rest of the table was doing the same.

She turned around, tears streaming down her cheeks now, and stared at the rest of the Great Hall. The Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors looked at her with commiseration. The Ravenclaws just shook their heads at her, as if telling her it was all her fault for falling for Draco’s tricks.

“Hey Weasel,” it was that voice again. She turned around to find Blaise Zabini in front of her, smirking at her. “You crying Weasel? Did you *lurve* him?” he started laughing again.

Ginny was unable to move, completely in shock, as the laughter echoed on around her and her own tears only added to her humiliation. She had been used and dumped, tricked by a boy she had thought she loved.

“Hey Weasel,” Blaise was speaking again, “can I have a go next? I mean, it only took Draco a few weeks to get you in the sack right?”

“What a slut!” Parkinson shrieked, pointing at her. Blaise hadn’t stopped laughing.

“Hey,” another voice spoke this time, “why don’t you shut up?”

“What’s this?” Blaise asked, looking at the boy who had just come up by Ginny’s side. “Another one of your boyfriends slut?”

“I said shut up,” the boy said, and Ginny turned to see Neville Longbottom standing next to her. She turned into him, finding solace, hiding from her humiliation.

"Or what?" Blaise asked. "You'll trip over your feet and fall flat at my superior feet? Everyone knows you're a pathetic excuse for a wizard."

"Just try me!" Neville growled.

"Come on then!" Blaise shot back, opening his arms wide.

"Okay."

Before Blaise could even blink, he was spun around and socked hard in the mouth. He fell onto his butt with a cry of pain. Looking up at his attacker, his eyes narrowed. Ron Weasley stood over him, practically being restrained by Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan.

"If I ever see you talking to my sister again," Ron growled, "I'll tear your head off your shoulders you stinking Slytherin!"

"Calm down mate," Seamus said.

It was lucky for them that no Professors were currently in the Great Hall; otherwise they all would have been having detentions by now. As it was, Neville steered Ginny out of the Great Hall and Dean, Seamus and Ron followed, glaring at the Slytherin table the whole time.

(--)

Draco stormed into the Slytherin common room, tearing through it all the way up to the sixth year dormitory. He slammed the door behind him and then leant back against it, his hands balled together and genuine tears in his eyes.

You idiot! His mind rallied against him, berating him. *How could you do it?*

Draco ran a hand through his hair and clenched his eyes shut, trying to will away the tears. Boys shouldn't cry, especially Slytherins. He could hardly believe he'd actually gone through with it. He'd done it. He'd done exactly what he said he would. He'd won. But it sure as hell didn't feel like he'd won.

“Fuck!” He roared, lashing out at the nearest object, smashing his foot into Zabini’s bedside lamp. It flew across the room and shattered against the wall.

Draco let loose, turning towards the stone wall of the dungeon and hammering it with his fist. It hurt, but the pain was good. He deserved it. He unleashed all his emotions on the wall, smashing his fisted hand into it again and again. He stopped when he felt something crack.

Draco stared at his busted fist, the flesh peeling away in parts, oozing blood, and felt marginally better. But the guilt wouldn’t go away, no matter how much he concentrated on the pain.

“What have I done?” he whispered. “I’m such a fuckin idiot.”

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Harry was on his way to the Entrance Hall, his Invisibility Cloak clutched tightly in his hands. The last few weeks had been hectic, to say the least, and he had had to go through many awkward conversations.

First, Draco had made the biggest mistake of his life and had hurt Ginny Weasley terribly. Harry knew Draco felt bad about it, but there was nothing he could do. Draco had told him how he had tried to apologise to Ginny, and how she had laughed bitterly in his face and told him she could never love a filthy Slytherin like him. Draco was close to tears when he told Harry this, something that Harry had never seen before. Draco was always strong and guarded, hardly ever showing his emotions, and certainly not the ones he felt were weaknesses. But Draco had cried in front of him. Harry didn't know what to say, so he had just left the other boy alone. Harry didn't think Draco could do anything to rectify what he had done.

Secondly, both Hermione and Neville, who demanded to know if he knew what Draco was planning, had approached him. This time, he had to tell them the truth, and pleaded with them that they understood why he had done it. He truly believed that Draco wouldn't go through with it and if he had told them they would have instantly gone to Ginny and told her. Harry admitted he was wrong and asked them to forgive him, which they had done.

Hermione understood his intentions, but said that next time he should trust her more. Neville had just nodded curtly and left. He had been cold to Harry for the past few weeks and Harry didn't press him. He suspected Neville was beginning to develop feelings for the youngest Weasley.

During the second week, Harry had returned to the Slytherin common room to find Draco sitting alone, nursing a black eye and bleeding lip. The other Slytherin's seemed to be giving him a wide berth. Only Blaise Zabini was sitting with him, but judging by the look on Draco's face, he would rather it be otherwise.

Harry sat down and asked Draco what happened and the older boy had admitted that Ron Weasley had beaten him up. Blaise had them

piped in that Draco had let him, not even fighting back, and started to rant at Draco. Harry quickly told him to shut up and then motioned for Draco to follow him. They finished the talk privately in Slytherin's chamber, where Draco admitted he felt he deserved everything he got. Harry was once again witness to a Draco he had never seen before. In fact, ever since that day he hadn't seen the real Draco once.

But things were finally starting to look up, as Dumbledore had just contacted him and told him that he had found the location of one of Horcruxes. He had told Harry to get his Cloak and to meet him in the Entrance Hall.

Harry found Dumbledore waiting for him, wrapped in a long dark cloak of his own. Dumbledore smiled kindly at him and motioned him forward.

"Before we go Harry," Dumbledore said, leaning down slightly to talk quietly, "I need to ask you something. This mission will be potentially dangerous, do you understand?"

"Yes sir," Harry replied.

"And you still wish to join me?" Dumbledore pressed.

"Of course," Harry said.

"Now, one last thing, I want you to give me your word that you will obey my instructions, no matter what. Will you Harry?"

Harry paused, examining Dumbledore's face closely, then nodded. "I will."

"Even if I tell you to run?" Dumbledore expanded.

"I said I will Professor," Harry said, "I know how import this is. You have my word. I'll follow your orders, even if you tell me to run."

"Good," Dumbledore said, smiling kindly again and pulling himself up to his full height. "Then will you please cover yourself with the Cloak and we shall begin."

Harry nodded and did so, throwing the Invisibility Cloak over his head. Dumbledore opened the doors to the Entrance Hall and left the castle and Harry followed.

"We will be going to the Hogs Head Harry," Dumbledore explained, "do you know where that is?"

"Yeah," Harry answered.

"Good," Dumbledore said, "after that, we shall Apparate to the location of the Horcrux. You know how to Apparate now, correct?"

"Yeah," Harry said, "but I don't have my licence yet."

"In that case I will guide you," Dumbledore said, "it's no trouble."

They fell silent the rest of the way, Dumbledore leading and Harry following close by, invisible. They passed the Three Broomsticks and then turned left, down another street to the Hogs Head. Dumbledore stopped just outside the door and turned to face Harry.

"Now then," Dumbledore said, "there will be no need to enter. Ready to go Harry?"

"Yes sir," Harry said, grabbing the old wizard's arm.

Then Harry felt the pressing sensation of Apparition all around him, suffocating him, before he was released onto cold stone, the smell and sound of the sea ringing in his ears. Harry looked around, getting his bearings, before turning to face the sea. They were on the side of a high cliff overlooking the ocean, which was violent and dark below them, the waves crashing into the rock face under their feet.

"Are you okay Harry?" Dumbledore asked, pulling his cloak tighter around him.

"Fine," Harry said, looking down at the violent ocean below him.

"This way then," Dumbledore said, leading him along the side of the rock face.

Harry followed, keeping close to the cliff. The ledge was only narrow and was just enough room for them to walk single file, following the cliff face. Harry could even feel the spray of the ocean against his face; they were that close to the water.

“You can take the Cloak off now Harry,” Dumbledore said, coming to a stop, and pointing to a small cave opening just across from them.

Harry did so, stuffing the Cloak into his pocket. “Is this the cave Riddle tormented those kids from the Orphanage in?” Harry asked, leaning out to get a better look, but keeping one hand on the rock face to steady him.

“Indeed it is,” Dumbledore said, turning to face him, “now, I’m assuming you will have no objections to getting a little wet?”

Harry shook his head, consenting and then watched as Dumbledore turned from him and slipped into the water before him. Harry followed, keeping an eye on Dumbledore just in case. He pushed his way through the water, staring at Dumbledores back, amazed that the old wizard could even move through the piercingly cold water. They entered the cave, where the water was less violent, and finally reached dry land.

Harry heaved himself up and out of the water, finding Dumbledore standing just a way away from him, examining the rock wall before him. The cave was almost as large as the Entrance Hall at Hogwarts, circling them in an almost perfect circle. Harry could feel the magical energy radiating of the place.

“What now Professor?” Harry asked.

Dumbledore didn’t answer, but he started to move around, scrutinising the place. Harry followed him with interesting, feeling the magical energy grow even stronger with every step they took. It was amazing, but Dumbledore seemed to be able to feel the pull of the magical energy, and followed it to its source. He stopped before a portion of the wall and put his hands against it, then smiled and pulled back. Harry took a step back as well and continued to watch.

Dumbledore pulled out his wand and pointed it at the wall. Harry watched as a concealed doorway appeared, glowing, but then disappeared the next second. Dumbledore frowned slightly in thought and continued to study the wall for almost a full two minutes.

"Hmm," Dumbledore hummed, "it can't be."

"Sir?" Harry asked, confused, and not liking it.

"I think we are required to make a payment to pass," Dumbledore answered.

"A payment?"

"Blood." Dumbledore said, and then pulled out a sharp looking knife.

"Hey," Harry said, stepping forward. Dumbledore turned to face him, an eyebrow raised. "Sir, I should do it. I'm younger and stronger, no offence."

"Oh," Dumbledore laughed, his eyes twinkling, "none taken, but I'm afraid it must be I. Your blood is far too precious." And before Harry could do anything to stop him, he sliced, and a splatter of blood spread across the rock face, which glowed and then faded, exposing the archway they had witnessed before.

Harry scowled, but didn't say anything, just followed Dumbledore through the doorway and into another cavern. If the one they had just been in was roughly the size of the Entrance Hall, this one must have been at least five times the size of the Great Hall. It was so large that Harry couldn't even see the other side, nor could he even see the ceiling. In fact, he could only see a few feet in front of him. The place was oppressively dark, as if the darkness actually had weight.

"What's that sir?" Harry asked, pointing. Before them spread a huge lake, easily rivalling the lake at Hogwarts, and right on the horizon, spearing through the darkness, was a green glow.

"I think that would be the Horcrux Harry," Dumbledore answered, "but before we can reach it, we will have to find a way to cross this lake. Beware not to step into it, I believe it to be infested with Inferi."

“Oh great,” Harry said sarcastically, “zombies.”

Dumbledore cocked an eyebrow at him in amusement, but otherwise said nothing. He motioned for Harry to follow and they set off around the edge of the lake. They walked for a while before Dumbledore came to a stop again, raising a hand to signal for Harry to stop as well. Then he began examining the air before him, passing his fingers through it, as if searching for something invisible. It turned out he was, as his hand soon closed on something. He raised his wand with the other hand and tapped his fist, which made whatever it was that was in his grasp begin to glow green, like the mysterious light in the lake. The glow spread, falling down into the dark depths of the water. Dumbledore then tapped the chain and it began to thread its way through his hand, pulling whatever was on the other end of the chain up from the bottom of the lake. Harry watched as the boat came into view and then shuddered to a stop by the shore, rocking in the water.

“Here we go Harry,” Dumbledore said, motioning for him to go first, “step on in.”

Harry did and Dumbledore followed. The boat was far too small for them both, but they managed. Harry stared down into the lake, watching the pale faces of the dead flash up at him every now and then as the boat began to move.

“Think they’ll attack?” Harry asked.

“Certainly,” Dumbledore said, as if this wasn’t a problem, “but only once we remove the Horcrux. Do you know how to fend off Inferi Harry?”

“Fire.” Harry answered.

Dumbledore nodded and patted his shoulder.

“Then we shall have no problem,” Dumbledore said, “when it comes time to leave. Do not forget that weakness Harry, for many do, and it costs them dearly.”

“I’m not an idiot Professor,” Harry said, a little testily. Did Dumbledore really think he’d be stupid enough to forget something like that, even when under pressure?

“That you most certainly are not,” Dumbledore said, ignoring Harry’s annoyance.

They finally reached the green glow, which was revealed to be coming from a basin set on top of a plinth, which in turn was situated in the center of a small island in the middle of the lake. The boat hit ground and Harry quickly jumped out, followed more slowly by Dumbledore. Harry went up to the pedestal and examined the basin.

The basin contained a strange emerald coloured potion, which was what was giving of the strange glow they had seen from the shore. Harry extended his hand into the potion, but before he could even touch it, an invisible barrier sprang to life and blocked his path. He pulled back his hand and frowned. Dumbledore appeared next to him and looked down unto the basin as well.

“I tried to reach in,” Harry said, “but some sort of invisible barrier blocked me.”

“I see,” Dumbledore murmured thoughtfully, stretching his own hand out and passing it over the basin. He pulled out his wand and made some complicated looking gestures over it, which Harry recognised as analysis Magic. Dumbledore was checking for anyway to break through the barrier. He finally stopped and then waved his wand again, conjuring a fine silver goblet.

“Sir?” Harry asked curiously.

“The only way to get to the Horcrux is to get rid of this potion Harry,” Dumbledore said, “and I can see no clear way to do that, except from drinking it.”

“But sir,” Harry said, “surely that isn’t wise.”

“Maybe not,” Dumbledore said, “but you are forgetting one thing. I am not alone. Voldemort would not have expected two wizards to reach this point. The boat was evidence of that. It was only big enough to

carry one magical adult across. Voldemort has once again overlooked youth. This potion may incapacitate me, but you will do everything in your power to make me keep drinking and to get the Horcrux. Then I will be counting on you to get us out here safely and back to Hogwarts. Understand Harry?"

Harry swallowed, hardened his heart to the task, and then nodded.

"Good," Dumbledore said, and then scooped out a portion of the green liquid and downed it.

Harry watched, tense, waiting for something, anything, to happen. Dumbledore took a deep breath, and then drained another goblet full of the potion, and then again, another. He kept drinking and after the fifth goblet full, the effects started to show. Dumbledore staggered forward and clutched at the basin with his free hand, gasping for breath. Yet, through it all, he raised the goblet and scooped out another load, before drinking. This time he gagged, closing his eyes tight, almost dropping the silver goblet. Harry grabbed it out of his hand before he could and, remembering Dumbledores words, filled the goblet once more.

"Come on Professor," Harry said, attempting to give him the goblet.

Dumbledore shied away, moaning. "No," he croaked.

"Come on," Harry said, "you have to, remember?"

"I can't..." Dumbledore moaned.

"Yes you can," Harry said, and tipped the goblet into his mouth forcefully. "Come on Professor, you're stronger than this."

Harry got another goblet full and repeated himself, like a mantra, as he forced the potion down his mentor's throat. It was a truly horrible scene, and he hatred himself for doing it, much like he had when he had used his Legilimency on Katie Bell, but he knew he had too. This was war, whether anyone realised it or not, and in war you had to do things you didn't like.

Harry forced goblet full after goblet full of the phosphorescent potion down Dumbledores throat until it was all gone. When the final drop had been swallowed, Dumbledore yelled out loud in agony and fell backwards, collapsing to the floor in a tightly curled ball, like an overgrown baby. It was despicable and Harry thought he might vomit. At that moment, he hated Voldemort more than he had ever in his entire life.

“Rennervate!”

Harry cast the rejuvenation spell as he fell to his knees by Dumbledore. It didn’t work. Cursing under his breath, Harry looked around, trying to find something that he could use to wake up his mentor. Nothing. Harry stood up, staring at Dumbledore the whole time, lying prone.

Running a hand through his hair, Harry ran back to the basin and scooped out the Horcrux, Slytherin’s locket. He rammed it into his pocket and raced back to Dumbledores side, attempting to lift the older wizard up. He wasn’t the strongest person, so it was quite a task for him, and as he had just managed to get Dumbledore’s arm over his shoulder, he heard the noise. Something was coming out of the water.

“Shit!” Harry muttered, and then let go of Dumbledore and stood, wand raised.

Harry saw the Inferi slowly start to drag their dead bodies from the murky water surrounding the small island and his eyes narrowed. He focuses his mind and roared:

“*Phloxmenti!*”

Fire burst from his wand like flame throwing, burning through the air, heading straight for the Inferi. He heard their screams coming from inside the wall of flame he had erected before him and could even smell their rotting flesh burning, but he ignored it all and turned back to Dumbledore. It took some doing, but he managed to get the heavier wizard standing, with his arm slung over Harrys shoulders. Of course, standing was maybe going a little to far. He was more

supporting the old wizard with his own weight. Dumbledore still hadn't moved. He was just dead weight.

Please don't be dead, Harry thought. He dragged Dumbledore over to the boat, erecting more flames to block the Inferi from getting at him. Shoving Dumbledore unceremoniously into the tiny boat, Harry climbed in after him, practically sitting on the old wizard, but being unable to help it. He kicked off from the shore and the boat started towards the other side of the lake, leaving the Inferi behind. At least, Harry had hoped, but alas, he was to be disappointed.

Inferi started erupting from the murky depths, their hands clawing and gaping maws opening wide, revealing rotting teeth. Harry summoned more fire to keep them at bay and was almost overwhelmed, but they somehow managed to reach the shore.

Harry dumped Dumbledore out of the boat and then jumped out after him, casting another Phloxmenti spell behind him for good measure. Then he hauled Dumbledore to his feet again and started towards the cave exit. When the smell of fresh sea air and salt hit his nose, he took a deep breath, not having realised how much the stench of dead flesh had invaded his senses until that very moment. He dropped Dumbledore at the cave exit and turned back, but found the cave empty. The Inferi hadn't followed him. Sighing in relief, he fell to his knees beside Dumbledore and shook the old man.

"Professor?" he asked, but got no response. He pressed his ear over where he knew Dumbledore's heart would be and heard a steady, but somewhat slow heartbeat. Although not dead, Dumbledore was catatonic.

Harry looked around himself again, trying to think of what he should do next. He was stuck here, unless he Apparated them both back himself. He could do it, probably, but then what? Did anyone know he had tagged along with Dumbledore when they left? Hell, did anyone even know Dumbledore had left? Surely they did. Professor Snape, probably, but that thought didn't exactly cheer him up. Then it hit him. Professor McGonagall - she'd know, surely.

Resigned, Harry grabbed Dumbledore's arm and concentrated on his destination. The ever familiar pressing sensation followed and Harry

felt the ground beneath him change. He opened his eyes and looked around. Hogsmeade, yes! He hauled Dumbledore back to his feet and set off for Hogwarts.

It took him a while, but he finally reached his destination. Shimming through the gates, he continued on to the huge double doors leading to the Entrance Hall. When he reached them, he found them locked.

“Great,” Harry muttered, collapsing under Dumbledore’s weight. He leant the Headmaster against the double doors and stood up again, his back popping in protest. Groaning to himself, he looked around, once again reviewing his options.

It didn’t take him long to think of a solution and he was off, heading to Hagrids cabin. He had to leave Dumbledore, but he didn’t think the Headmaster was in any danger. He just couldn’t carry the man’s weight anymore.

“Hagrid?” Harry shouted, once he reached the half giants cabin, banging on his door. He heard Fang bark and something heavy hit the floor, making the earth around the cabin rumble. Then he heard Hagrid grunting in confusion.

“Hagrid!” Harry repeated, shouting again and banging on the door. He heard Hagrid mumbled something groggily, and then heavy footsteps approach the door. It opened and Harry stared up at the giant who had rescued him from the Dursleys.

“Arry?” Hagrid grumbled. “What’s goin’ on ‘ere? Why aren’t you sleepin’?”

“Hagrid,” Harry said, ignoring the half giants questions, “Dumbledore’s in trouble and I can’t get in the castle. Come on!”

“What?” Hagrid asked, his beetle black eyes blinking at Harry in confusion. “Dumbledore? Trouble?”

“Yes,” Harry said impatiently, “come on!” And he took off, trusting Hagrid would follow.

He did, with Fang at his heels. Harry led Hagrid to Dumbledore, stopping before the unconscious wizard and bending over, hands on his knees, gasping. He was exhausted, mentally and physically.

“Harry,” Hagrid said, staring at Dumbledore in shock, “what happened?”

“I don’t know if I should tell you,” Harry said, honestly, “it was something that Dumbledore told me in confidence.”

“Well then,” Hagrid said, knowing that if Dumbledore wanted him to know he’d tell him, “let’s get this door open.”

Hagrid pounded on the door until the squid caretaker Argus Filch appeared, angry and grumpy as usual, especially after having his sleep disturbed. Hagrid brushed past him easily, ignoring the squibs angry protests, carrying Dumbledore with him. Harry followed.

“What are you doing out of bed boy?” Filch asked, but Harry ignored him and followed Hagrid.

Hagrid went straight for Professor McGonagalls office, but before they could get there, Snape appeared.

“What’s going on?” Snape demanded, once he spotted Harry and a motionless Dumbledore. Filch, having followed them, echoed him.

“There’s bin’ some kind o’ accident,” Hagrid answered, “Harry said he couldn’ tell me what.”

“Potter?” Snape demanded.

“Sorry Professor,” Harry said, “I can’t tell you until I have Professor Dumbledores permission. Either way I don’t really think that’s what we should be worried about, do you? He’s been like that for almost half an hour now and he still hasn’t moved a muscle. I think someone should at least take him to Madam Pomfrey.”

Snapes eyebrow twitched, but he didn’t disagree.

“Harry’s righ’,” Hagrid agreed.

“Yes,” Snape said, motioning for Hagrid to lead the way, “get him to Poppy then.”

Hagrid left as Snape turned to face Harry and said: “Potter, come with me!”

“Shouldn’t I be getting to bed Professor?” Harry asked, fondling Slytherin’s locket in his pocket. He really didn’t want to reveal that to Snape, of all people.

“No,” Snape said, “I want to know what happened.”

“I can’t tell you anything Professor,” Harry said, “I already told you.”

“I don’t care Potter!” Snape roared with his fists clenched. “I’m taking charge now and you will do as I say!”

“I can’t,” Harry said, meeting Snapes eyes. “Like I said, I already told you. The only thing I can tell you is that he drank a potion. It was green. That’s all.”

Harry turned around and started to walk away, but Snape grabbed his arm and yanked him backwards, spinning him around. Their eyes met and at that instant Harry felt Snape probe, but Harry was ready. He flung up his shields and felt power surge through him. Snape gasped and flew backwards, magical energy lighting up the entire corridor and tracing his trajectory, straight into the wall of the corridor. Snape slumped to the floor, unconscious. Filch was staring at him with a mixture of shock, horror, and fear.

“I’d get him to Madam Pomfrey as well,” Harry said mildly, as he passed Filch and headed towards Slytherin’s chamber.

He used one of the secret passages to quickly vanish; making sure no one could find him, if they did decide to look. Then he quickly made his way to Slytherin’s chamber. He reached the large secret room and collapsed onto the green sofa with exhaustion. After getting his breath back, he pulled out Slytherin’s locket and examined it.

Harry’s eyes narrowed. It wasn’t Slytherin’s locket he held in his hand. At first glance, it did appear to be the same, but on closer scrutiny, Harry

was sure. This wasn't that locket. It was a fake. Dumbledore had drunk that potion for nothing but a fake. Harry hurled the locket into the wall, where it smashed and fell to the floor. It didn't make him feel any better, so he buried his head in his hands and groaned in frustration.

"Fuck!" he cursed, kicking the table in front of him and tipping it over, spilling books and pieces of parchment across the floor.

Harry stood and started pacing, something he always did when he was incredibly angry. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed something clashing with the silver of the locket, and turned to exam it again. A piece of paper was sticking out of the locket, where it had broken open. Harry picked it up and opened it. It read:

'To the dark lord

I know I will be dead long before you read this

But I want you to know that it was I who discovered your secret.

I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can.

I face death in the hope that when you meet your match,

You will be mortal once more

R.A.B.'

Harry crumpled up the paper and let it fall to the floor. So someone had gotten to the Horcrux before them and replaced it with this fake - someone who was most likely dead. Sighing, Harry fell to his knees and pounded the floor.

"Great going R.A.B.," Harry said sarcastically, "whoever you are."

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The news that Harry Potter had dragged a nearly dead Dumbledore back to Hogwarts during the middle of the night quickly spread throughout the school the next day. The entire castle was a buzz with the information. Most of the students could be found huddled together with friends, repeating the tale over and over again, and saying how they always knew Potter was no good.

The Hufflepuff Justin Finch-Fletchley would tell anyone his theory that Potter had dragged Dumbledore off in the middle of the night, most likely luring him away with false information, and then somehow ambushed him. Nobody seemed to question the giant holes in his story, as everyone was quick to jump on the Potter is the next Dark Lord wagon. Justin could be heard telling everyone:

“Everyone knows that You Know Who feared Dumbledore the most, so it’s obvious that Potter would want to get rid of him as soon as possible.”

Overhearing this, Hermione scoffed and quickly stood up, knocking over her Pumpkin Juice in an attempt to leave the Great Hall as fast as possible.

“What’s her problem?” One of Justin’s friends, Hannah Abbot, asked.

Hermione had just about had enough. Everywhere she went, all she could hear was people laying into Harry, as if they knew him. They didn’t know a thing, and it was all she could do not to stand up and shout it to the world.

It was common knowledge that Dumbledore was still in the Hospital Wing, as he had been confined there since last night, and no one was allowed inside except the staff Hogwarts. Argus Filch, who was standing watch at the door with his cat at his heels, quickly sent anyone who even approached packing.

But Hermione had had enough. She wanted to know what was going on and she was sure that Harry was in the Hospital Wing, as she hadn’t seen him yet today, and he wasn’t in any of his usual hiding places. Well, he wasn’t in any she could get access too. She

supposed that he could have been in Slytherin's chamber, but she didn't think so. She rounded the corner and, as expected, Filch was standing guard outside the door. But what caught her eye was the flap of a black robe slipping through the door when Filch was examining his fingernails.

Harry, she thought with a grin, before approaching the hospital wing.

"And what do you think you're doing?" Filch asked scathingly once she reached him, Mrs. Norris hissing at his feet.

"I'm going in there," Hermione said, staring at him unflinchingly.

"Oh you are, are you?" Filch shot back.

"Yes I am," Hermione said, and before he could stop her she barged right past him.

As she opened the door ("Hey, get back here!") she heard Professor Snape's voice, raised and obviously angry:

"Potter, I demand to know what happened here!"

But then the door slammed shut behind her and everyone looked over her way. Hermione stood in the doorway, Filch behind her and red in the face, and felt her determination leave her. Everyone was staring at her, including Professor McGonagall, Professor Snape, Professor Hagrid and even Harry. She felt her face flush and was just about to rush out of the room when McGonagall spoke:

"Miss Granger," she said, tartly, "what are you doing here?"

"I'm sorry Professor," Hermione mumbled, and was about to go when Harry spoke.

"Hermione," he said, walking over to her, "are you okay?"

"Oh," Hermione gasped, surprised that he was actually talking to her. She had been expecting him to act as if he didn't even know her name, but here he was, talking to her in front of everyone. "I'm fine. I was...worried about you."

"I'm okay," Harry said, reaching her and taking her hand, "don't worry. You can stay, come on." And he led her back the staff of Hogwarts, who all had varying degrees of surprise written on their faces.

Professor Snape looked as if he was sucking on a lemon. Professor McGonagall had her eyebrow arched, which meant she was very interested, and judging by the tiny (*really tiny*) smile on her face, she was pleased as well. The only one not surprised by all this was Hagrid, who had, obviously, known about them for quite a while. On a side note, he was quite pleased with himself, having not blurted it out yet.

"Potter," Snape finally said, his flaring nostrils giving away his anger, "who do you think you are? Get your...girlfriend...out of here. This is not something to be discussed in front her."

"Actually," Harry said, "the only way I'm going to answer anything is with Hermione here. If you don't like it - then tough. She knows about everything anyway, so it's not like it matters."

"Potter," McGonagall said, interrupting, "I have to agree with Professor Snape here. This conversation is...well..."

"Go ahead Professor," Harry said; having mercy on the flustered witch, "you can say it, you know. It's for members of the Order of the Phoenix only, right? Well, consider Hermione officially a member of the Order, as well as myself. I'm the one that's going to have to do it in the end, aren't I? So as far as I'm concerned, I call the shots and if you don't like it, then leave."

"Harry!" Hermione scolded.

Harry smiled at her and then turned back to the stunned Professor's. "No disrespect intended."

"Now listen here Potter," Snape started, "I've had enough of your cheek. You're a student in this school and you should damn well act like one. I will not tolerate being flung across the room," here Snape touched the back of his head, "nor will I tolerate being bossed around by an arrogant brat!"

"Then the doors over there, sir," Harry said, pointing.

Snape looked ready to burst, so McGonagall spoke up before he could.

"I think we should concentrate on the matter at hand," she said, "before we deal with Potter's insolence. Now, what happened last night?"

Harry sighed. "We went on a mission," Harry said, "to get something important. I can't tell you more than that. Professor Dumbledore told me because he knows, and values, what I'll have to do. Why he hasn't told you, I don't know. Anyway, he ended up having to drink an unknown potion, and that's what put him in this condition. He's been unconscious since he drank it. The potion was green and it gave off a very bright glow."

"Severus?" McGonagall said, wordlessly asking him if he knew of such a potion.

"I'm unfamiliar with a potion like that," Snape replied, scowling, "but I'll have a look through my books and see what I can find."

"Then I suggest you do that now," McGonagall said, giving him a look, which clearly said she would brook no argument. Snape nodded curtly and left, giving Harry and Hermione a scathing look as he went.

"Sorry for any disrespect Professor," Harry said, "it wasn't directed at you, really. Professor Snape isn't high on my list of buddies, if you get what I mean. I don't trust him."

"I am aware," McGonagall said, nodding. "It seems I'm not as uniformed as you though, doesn't it Potter?"

"I'm sorry Professor," Harry said, and Hermione could tell he meant it, "I really meant what I said though, I didn't mean to disrespect you. I just can't talk freely in front of someone I don't trust, no matter what Professor Dumbledore thinks."

"I agree," McGonagall said, "you made the right decision. I also do not fully trust Professor Snape. You may speak openly to me though,

I am sure? I give you my word I will utter them to no one, as I'm sure Hagrid will do as well, correct?"

"Righ' you are Professor," Hagrid agreed.

"Thanks," Harry said, before taking a seat on one of the beds. Hermione hopped up along side him. "But before I do, where is Professor Dumbledore?"

"He has been moved to his quarters in the Headmaster's office," McGonagall answered, conjuring a stiff looking chair of her own and sitting.

"I suppose that's best," Harry said. "Did he show any sign of life other than a slow heartbeat?"

McGonagall shook her head sadly.

"Harry," Hermione said, getting his attention, "what happened?"

"We left to find an object of great importance to Voldemort," Harry began.

"The Horcrux?" Hermione asked, putting it all together.

"Wait a minute," McGonagall said, sitting even further upright in her chair, if that was possible. "A Horcrux? You can't be serious."

"I'm afraid so," Harry said, "it's what Professor Dumbledore has been doing this past year or so. We think Voldemort split his soul into seven pieces, meaning he has six Horcruxes out there. We've managed to destroy a few, like the Diary that Ginny Weasley had in her first year and a ring that used to belong to Salazar Slytherin. But that leaves four more. Last night we went to get another, and to get to the Horcrux Dumbledore had to drink that potion. I managed to get us back here, but it was hard work."

"And the Horcrux?" McGonagall asked.

"It was a fake," Harry said, "I looked at it last night."

"After you gave Professor Snape a concussion." McGonagall observed tartly.

"He tried to read my mind and I blocked him," Harry said, "I certainly didn't intend to send him flying across the corridor. Hell, I don't even know how I did it. Not that I'm really complaining."

"Harry!" Hermione said, feeling a sense of déjà vu.

"Well I can't help it if I don't like the man," Harry said, holding his hands up in defence. Hermione glared at him, though she wasn't really angry.

They both noticed how quiet it had got in the room at the same time, and turned to face their audience in sync, noticing how McGonagall was smiling widely and how Hagrid had tears in his eyes.

"You remind me so much of Lily and James," McGonagall said softly, "how long have you been seeing each other?"

"A while," Hermione answered. "Harry didn't want many people to know, cause it'd cause too much of a scene. You know how he is. At first I was a little put out by it, but I kind of agree with him now."

"Yes," McGonagall said, "I can see how it might cause a bit of trouble. But, though it's none of my business, I must say I do not object. I've always admired you Miss Granger and I couldn't think of a better girl for you Potter."

"Thank you Professor," Hermione said, blushing. Harry squeezed her hand and she turned to him, grinning. Harry grinned back and gave her a quick kiss, before turning his attention back to the head of Gryffindor.

"So," Harry said, jumping down from the bed, "I think I've told you all that's really needed. Do you mind if we get out here?"

"Certainly," McGonagall replied, "I'll contact you if we need anything else. Have fun you two."

"We will," Harry said, smirking and tickling her when she jumped down as well, making her shriek.

"Ah," she gasped, giggling, "Harry, stop it!"

"Behave now children," McGonagall scolded, but she Hermione could tell she didn't really mean it.

It was odd, Hermione mused as they left the Hospital Wing, that she had never even suspected Professor McGonagall could be so human. She'd always been so strict and imposing, Hermione had never even considered that deep down she could be such a kind and motherly person. It was nice to see that not everyone viewed Harry with distrust. After all, she could tell that McGonagall really cared about Harry.

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Time continued to fly by, growing closer and closer to the end of term, and the end of Harry's sixth year. Dumbledore still had not awoken from his coma and Snape and Madam Pomfrey, despite their combined attempts, had been unable to rouse him. According to Snape, he couldn't find any mention of a glowing green potion in any of his books, and therefore had no idea what Dumbledore ingested. Harry wasn't sure whether he was telling the truth or not and had been secretly looking through his own books, but had yet to find anything.

On the subject of Snape, Harry had been prepared for his relationship with Hermione to be publicly ousted, but that had yet to happen. The only thing he could think of was that Professor McGonagall had somehow talked Snape out of it. How she had done that, he had no idea, but he was grateful anyway. While he didn't really mind the idea of being out in the open with Hermione anymore, he certainly wasn't going to reveal it until he had to.

But as time went by, Hogwarts seemed to become stranger and stranger. It was like this unknown, invisible fog had descended on the castle, making everyone act strangely. Most students seemed on edge, maybe because of the knowledge that Dumbledore was out of action (who had always been the public's safe net, despite the fact the old wizard had been publicly discredited since stating Voldemort's return). Everyone seemed to view that as a sign that something was wrong, and therefore the entire wizard world, and Hogwarts in particular, was on edge.

Draco had continued to isolate himself. He only ever spoke to Harry now, but the conversation was always forced and rather one-sided. Harry just had the distinct impression that life was slowly draining out of Draco. Was he that heartbroken over what he'd done? Harry had tried to slap some sense (metaphorically speaking) into the young Malfoy, but his efforts had failed.

And as time went by, Harry found himself growing even more worried. Something was definitely wrong. He had been feeling it all year, like everything was just leading up to this one big moment, and then it

would all come crashing down. Harry had the unpleasant feeling that that moment was rapidly approaching, whatever it was. First it was the Junior Death Eater problem that he had still been unable to solve. Second was the strange silence of the Junior Death Eater, who after his first act had seemingly fallen off the face of the earth. And then, out of the blue, Dumbledore falling into his coma. But what was next? What was the last domino that set everything into motion?

"Harry, what's wrong?" Hermione asked, her voice coming from where her head was buried in his chest.

They were lying cuddled up on the sofa in Slytherin's chamber, the room lit by only a few candles, giving it a nice dim light that set the mood perfectly.

"I think something is going to happen," Harry said, honestly. "I just...I have this bad feeling."

"You have a bad feeling?" Hermione repeated, craning her neck to look at him. "Harry, that's perfectly understandable. Everyone has a bad feeling. It's probably just nothing."

"It isn't," Harry said, "I know it. Something stinks about this whole thing."

"Professor Dumbledore will be fine," Hermione said. "It's not your fault what happened. You said he told you to follow his orders and you did. Besides, Professor Snape will find the cure eventually."

"I've told you - "

"I know," Hermione said, interrupting. "You don't trust Professor Snape. But Harry, if he was really working for V-Voldemort, then don't you think he'd have done something by now."

"Maybe," Harry said, sighing, "but I still don't trust him. He just has this very distinct aura around him. I've never understood the man. When I first came to Hogwarts he was all over me. He never let me out of his sights. It's like he was waiting for me to do something. After a while he started to leave me alone, but I always felt he had his eyes on me, just waiting, you know? It was only when I helped prove Sirius

innocent that he started to treat me a little coldly, like I'd let him down. You know what I think Hermione?"

"What?" She asked, engrossed.

"I think he was watching me to see if I'd do something evil," Harry said, "like what Tom Riddle would have done. I think he was waiting to see if I would be the next Dark Lord, and if I'd have shown even an inkling off it, he'd either have been kissing my ass or trying to control and manipulate me."

"That's stupid Harry," Hermione said, but she didn't sound convinced. It was like she was trying to justify something just because she didn't want to admit the truth.

"It's not," Harry said. "It's just how I feel."

"You can't rationalise that, its just speculation." Hermione argued.

"You're right," Harry said, "I'm not saying its fact. It's just a feeling and feelings are irrational. You can't explain them with logic."

"I suppose," Hermione admitted. "But I still don't think it's true."

"And that's how you feel," Harry said, "and you also can't prove that either can you? Let's just drop it Hermione. The only person who believes me about Snape is Draco and at the moment he's probably staring at some wall with moony eyes."

"You really think Draco is a good judge of character?" Hermione asked, sitting up now. "He's not really reliable is he?"

"He's a lot more reliable than you or anyone else knows," Harry said.

"Is that a feeling as well?" Hermione asked, rather sarcastically.

"Are you trying to pick a fight Hermione?" Harry asked, sitting up as well.

"I...no," she said, deflated. "Sorry, I don't mean to be snippy. I just don't understand you're faith in him. He really hurt Ginny."

“And I’m sorry about that, but that doesn’t mean a thing,” Harry said. “Draco made a mistake, he’ll even admit it himself, which is not something he likes to do. He’s very proud.”

“Of what?” Hermione asked, rolling her eyes. “Being a Malfoy?”

“No,” Harry said, “not being a Malfoy. That’s what he’s proud of. Himself. A little too much, I think. But when push comes to shove, Draco will be there for me, that I believe. And yes, that’s a feeling.”

Hermione blushed. “I still don’t get it,” she said, “but okay.”

“You will in time,” Harry said. “Anyway, enough about that. I don’t want to spend our time together arguing.”

“Me either,” Hermione said, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Harry said and then pulled her closer, “come here.”

They kissed for several minutes, exploring, as they’d become accustomed to. Hermione ended up on the bottom again, with Harry lightly covering her.

“I think this is what it’s like,” Hermione said, randomly, as they both broke from a kiss, “you know, being a proper couple. I mean, we argued, but it wasn’t really hateful or anything, like most arguments, you know?”

“I know,” Harry said, kissing her chastely.

“You see some couples,” Hermione went on, “and all they do is argue, but I don’t think it’s healthy. Ginny and her old boyfriend Dean used to do it all the time. So much that people had a bet going for when they’d break up. I don’t want to be one of those couples.”

“We aren’t,” Harry said, kissing her again.

“Harry,” Hermione said, stopping him as he went to kiss her again. “I’ve been thinking. You know, about us. I think we’ve taken things pretty slow, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, “I didn’t want to rush you.”

“I know,” Hermione said, “and thank you for that. It was nice to just be, you know, with no pressure. But I’m going kind of crazy right now.”

“What?” Harry asked, arcing an eyebrow in confusion. “What do you mean crazy?”

“I...” Hermione blushed. “I mean, I...oh this is embarrassing. I mean I really, really want to make love with you.”

“Oh.”

“Oh?” Hermione repeated. “That’s it? Oh? Harry, I just told you I want to have sex with you, you realise that right?”

Harry laughed, the utter stupidity of the moment breaking him out of his shock. Hermione scowled at him.

“What are you laughing at?” Hermione asked, trying to keep her voice calm.

“Sorry Hermione,” Harry said, chuckled. “It was just funny, that’s all, sorry. I can’t explain it. Asking me if I realised you meant sex.” He chuckled again. “Sorry, it was just funny. I really just ruined the moment didn’t I?”

“Yeah, you did,” Hermione said, “not that there was much of a moment anyway. I really didn’t plan to argue right before I brought this up.” And here she laughed, grinning at Harry. He grinned back.

“I guess in real life it’s never really perfect, huh?” Harry said.

“Yeah, I guess.” Hermione agreed.

“I’d love to make love with you Hermione,” Harry said, still grinning.

“You sound so silly,” Hermione giggled.

“Now you know how I felt,” Harry quipped.

“Yeah, yeah,” Hermione said, before leaning up and kissing him full on the lips, her tongue probing. She pulled back and smiled up at him. “If you think we’re going to do it on this musty old couch you’ve got another thing coming.”

“Right,” Harry said, mock slapping his forehead, before sitting up and then standing. He offered his hand to her. “M’lady?”

She giggled and took it, allowing him to pull her to her feet and then escort her over to the bedroom. At the door she stopped and turned to face him, cupping his face and giving him a little kiss.

“Before we go in there,” she said, “I’d like to hear you say it. I know you have trouble verbalising your emotions, but just this once, if you -”

Harry stopped her with a finger, idly brushing a strand of curly hair out of her face. He took a deep breath.

“I love you,” he said, and then grinned at her. “Voldemort be damned, if I can say that, I can damn sure kick his ass, huh?”

“Harry!” she slapped him on the arm. “Stop ruining the moment!”

But despite her words, she was grinning widely at him, tears of happiness in her eyes. Harry backed her up slowly, leaning forward to whisper in her ear, “I love you so much,” before kicking the door shut behind him.

(--)

Authors Note: So there, they finally have sex. Yay! Sorry if everyone was expecting something really sappy and romantic, but like I said, I don’t really think life is like that. I should point out that the Draco/Ginny sex bit was typical romance stuff, but that turned out to be fake, didn’t it? In retrospect, the Harry/Hermione sex scene (or rather, lead up to sex scene) was real and not really very romantic.

On another note, I have a question for you all. Would you like me to write some smutty sex scenes (for both Draco/Ginny and Harry/Hermione) or not? If I did, I’d probably post them as separate

fics, like one-shots, and they'd probably only be on Portkey. So, what do you think? Interested? Let me know.

Piccolo999

Chapter Thirty

Life sucked, plain and simple. At least, that was Ginny Weasleys latest philosophy. It had been over a month since Draco had crushed her heart and spat all over it, in front of the entire school, no less. Ginny had been in a funk ever since then, and for the most part had been left alone. Nobody, at least none of her friends and fellow housemates, had made fun of her or judged her. Only the Slytherins, all of who took great delight in calling her a slut and laughing at her at every opportunity they got.

Ginny figured she deserved it for being so stupid. She just couldn't understand how she could have fallen for his tricks. Hermione had told her not worry about it, but she just couldn't stop. Was she that gullible? How else could she have fallen for him that quickly? Or at least, thought she had fallen for him. She realised that now, after all, she had never been in love with him. He just manipulated her and made her think that.

She didn't understand him, but she didn't really think she wanted to either. Why did he go through all that? Just to humiliate her? Or was there another reason? Did he hate her that much? And if so, why did he try to beg her forgiveness?

That was another thing she just couldn't understand. Draco had approached her a few days after the incident (for that was what she called it in her head) and tried to plead forgiveness. He told her he was sorry, with tears in his eyes and everything. But Ginny wasn't that gullible, she'd seen those "tears" before and she wasn't going to fall for it again. She told him she could never love a filthy Slytherin like him and then she had run away. Behold, the brave Gryffindor Ginny Weasley.

Yeah, so brave she had been hiding in her room for almost two months now. The only time she ever went down into the public eye was when she needed to. Meaning - lessons and dinnertime. In fact, she hardly ever went at dinnertime. She just couldn't stand all the eyes on her, not to mention most of the time she felt like throwing up after she had eaten. It was safe to say she'd lost a lot of weight since the incident.

The only good thing to come out of the whole situation was the forgiveness of her friends and, most importantly, her brother. Ron had been treating her like a princess for the last few weeks. He didn't make fun of her and he didn't let anyone else make fun of her. He was like her knight in shining armour. He hadn't even given her a snide 'I told you so', which she thought she dearly deserved. After all, he had warned her and she had ignored him and made fun of him.

Surprisingly, Ron wasn't the only knight in shining armour she had. Neville Longbottom had also taken to guarding her whenever she went around the castle. She'd told him he didn't have to, but he had just ignored her and followed her around anyway. She really didn't mind. In fact, she really enjoyed his company and was secretly glad he hadn't broken under her assurances that she was fine all by herself.

So that was how Ginny spent her days at Hogwarts, closed up in her dormitory, snuggling her pillow. Occasionally she cried, but it was definitely not over a broken heart. She just cried over her own stupidity. That was it. Absolutely.

On this particular day, she was burrowed up in her blankets, staring at the card Draco had sent her for Christmas. The picturesque view of Hogsmeade, nestled between the mountains. It was beautiful. Unfortunately, it was tainted by memories of herself and Draco. She could hardly stand to look at it, but she just couldn't throw it away either. What was wrong with her?

The door opening drew her back to reality and Ginny looked up, over the mound of quilts around her, towards the door. It was Ellen Parker and Kate Lee, two of her dorm mates.

Ellen was probably the prettiest girl in her year, or at least that's what Ginny thought. She was the typical stereotype for perfection, blonde hair and bright blue eyes. Kate was the exact opposite, with a rather large frame and frizzy red hair. Still, the two girls were inseparable, so much so that people referred to them as Parker and Lee more than their actual names.

See them heading towards her, she stuffed the card under her pillow as the two girls approached and sat up, rubbing her eyes as if she'd been sleeping.

"Still moping Ginny?" Kate said teasingly, sitting her slightly chubby frame down on the bed.

"Yeah," Ellen added, standing in front of her in her mother pose, hand on hips. "You really need to get out more. You look terrible. Moping does nothing for your complexion."

Kate giggled, adding: "Neither does the lack of showering - pee-yew!"

"Hey!" Ginny protested, but couldn't help smile nonetheless.

"She's right," Ellen continued. "You stink. Come on Ginny. Go have a shower and then we'll head down to the Great Hall and stuff some food down that tiny body of yours."

"Yeah," Kate said, "we'll fatten you up like a Christmas turkey."

"I don't think I like the idea of you fattening me up Kate," Ginny said jokingly, as she climbed out of the bed. "But you guys are right, I do stink."

"So go shower," Ellen pressed, "we'll wait for you."

"I don't think I can go down," Ginny said sadly, "I just don't think I can handle all the staring and whispering today."

"Oh come on," Ellen moaned, "don't be a wimp. You're a Gryffindor, be brave!"

"I think the Sorting Hat was on drugs the day he sorted me," Ginny said, "because I'm not feeling even remotely brave right now."

Kate giggled again, which wasn't all that unusual.

"Don't be silly," Ellen admonished. "Now get in that shower and get ready. I won't take no for an answer. We're going down there even if I have to drag you."

"I..."

"Ah!" Ellen interrupted, holding a finger up in protest. "No excuses. Shower! Now!"

Kate watched with a smile on her chubby face as Ginny spluttered, then slouched, defeated, into the bathroom.

Ginny didn't want to argue with her dorm mates, who she actually liked quite a bit. They weren't her best friends; in fact, she hardly ever hung out with them, but she had always got along fine with them. She was touched that the two of them had come to cheer her up today and make her face the public eye, even if she was a little terrified at the prospect.

Ginny stripped out of her PJ's and climbed into the nearest stall, turning the freezing water on and standing under it's spray. It was harsh, but exactly what she needed to jump start her body. The cold soon turned to warmth and she started to lather her body in soap, before rinsing herself clean and repeating. Finishing with her tangled hair, she climbed out of the shower and started to dry herself off.

Once she was done, she looked at herself in the mirror and had to agree with Ellen. She did look terrible - even with the shower. She was way too thin and her eyes had large ugly bags under them, making her look more like a hag than a girl. Sighing to herself, she wrapped the towel around her petite body and left the bathroom.

"That looks better," Ellen complemented her as she entered the dorm room.

"If this is better," Ginny said, motioning down to herself, "then I'd hate to see what I looked like before."

Kate giggled. "You did look pretty bad."

"Come on Kate," Ellen said, motioning for the girl to follow her, "let's leave Ginny alone so she can get dressed. We'll wait outside and if you're not outside in five minutes I'm coming back in to get you, naked or not!"

“Yes ma’am,” Ginny said sharply, saluting with a smile.

The two girls left and Ginny quickly got dressed, pulling on some underwear and plain muggle clothing with her Hogwarts robes over the top. Quickly combing her frazzled hair, she tied it back in a ponytail and made to leave the room.

It was strange, how just the simple act of someone trying to cheer her up could actually cheer her up more than anything in the world. Knowing that she had people who cared about her, like her brother Ron and her new friend Neville, and like her roommates, she just knew that she would be okay. She didn’t need Malfoy, not one bit.

Ginny went back to her bed before leaving and rummaged under her pillow to find the card she had stashed there earlier. She stared at the picture of Hogsmeade for a few seconds, before tearing the card in two, and then again, before letting the torn pieces fall into the trashcan by her bed. Smiling to herself, she left the room and joined her roommates outside. It was time to face Hogwarts again.

(--)

Harry was alone in Slytherins chamber, pouring over all of the potions textbooks he could find. He was desperately searching for a cure for whatever it was that Dumbledore had been forced to drink in the cave, but so far he was having no luck. He was frustrated beyond belief, because no matter how much he looked, he found nothing. Dumbledore was out of action because of him and he couldn’t do anything to help his old mentor.

“Maybe Snape is telling the truth,” Harry muttered, running a hand through his hair, “maybe whatever this potion is, it isn’t recorded in any books.”

Sighing, he slammed his current tome shut, waving a hand to dismiss the cloud of dust that arose from the old pages. He shoved it to one side and picked up one of the already discarded books, his eyes scanning the desk for the last book he had removed from Slytherins library. Cursing his disorganised mess of a table, he started riffling through all the other books littering the desk, searching for the last book. He was sure he had brought it out.

“Where...is...it...?” he muttered, growing even more annoyed.

Moving the last book out of the way, his eyes landed on the Marauders Map, which he had activated and set out at the corner of the table (just to keep an eye on things). Of course, he'd gotten so engrossed in reading he'd completely forgot about it. Turns out that was a big mistake.

“Oh no,” Harry gasped, his search for the missing book already forgotten.

(--)

The Great Hall was overrun with students, as was usual at this time of day. The loud chatter of a great many conversations filled the room, echoing, each voice trying to drown out the other. Ginny tried to ignore how everything seemed to quiet down when she entered, knowing it was all just in her mind. Surely she wasn't still on the top of the gossip food chain.

Invariably, her eyes were drawn to the Slytherin table and, not surprisingly, they found the mysterious grey eyes of Draco Malfoy. He was staring at her, an unreadable expression on his face. Ginny tried not to throw up when she saw Pansy Parkinson throw her arm around his shoulders and wink suggestively at her. She just turned away, not wanting to look anymore. In doing so, she completely missed Draco shrug Pansy away angrily.

Ignoring everything going on around her, she took a deep breath and joined her roommates at the Gryffindor table. She sat between the two girls, somehow feeling safer that way, and started piling food on her plate. She only gathered a small amount of food on her plate, not feeling hungry, but Ellen began to pile more on for her. When she looked at her roommate, Ellen just gave her a smile that told her not to argue and eat up. Ginny did, forcing herself to eat the food Ellen had put on her plate.

On the way down to the Great Hall, Ginny had seen Neville and Hermione studying in the corner, heads bent over respective pieces of parchment. Ron and his friends were also in the common room, sat around the fire playing a wizards chess tournament with another

Gryffindor. She didn't know him, but she thought he was a seventh year. Either way, she knew Ron would win. He always did.

Sitting at the Gryffindor table, Ginny felt like things were finally starting to return to normal. In fact, despite recent events, she thought they might have been getting better. She had great new friends in Hermione and Neville. Ron was being nicer to her than he ever had before. Dean Thomas had finally left her alone. Ginny felt a genuine smile appear on her face, but before it could fully form, a commotion came from outside the Great Hall.

Ginny looked up, along with most other students. Ellen and Kate, who had been talking animatedly, become quiet. In fact, the entire Great Hall, which had only seconds ago been full of the chatter of conversations, had gone deathly silent. At the staff table, Professor McGonagall had gotten to her feet. The only other Professors in the room at that time, Professor Snape and Professor Sprout, stood up as well.

"Severus, stay here, I will find out what is going on."

Due to the absolute quiet in the Great Hall, everyone heard those words, and turned to watch as Professor McGonagall started down the center isle towards the huge double doors leading to the Entrance Hall.

"What's going on?" Ginny heard a first year whisper to one of his friends, but nobody replied.

Professor McGonagall reached the double doors and placed her hand on the handle, pulling it open. Before it was even half open there was a flash of bright red light and McGonagall went flying backwards, arcing through the air, before crashing to the stone cold floor with a crunch. If it was possible for the Hall to be even more silent, it happened, but only for a second, and then chaos broke out.

Most students stood up, the chairs scraping against the floor, but hardly heard over the terrified screams of the younger years. Ginny stood with the rest of the student body, staring at Professor McGonagall's motionless form, before her eyes raised and glued

themselves to the double doors. She could vaguely hear Professor Snape shouting for order over all the chaos, but she didn't care.

Ginny watched with growing dread as the first black cloaked figure entered the Great Hall, the death white skull mask covering his face. He was followed by another, and another, and another. The Death Eaters entered the Great Hall one by one, fifteen in total. The hall had gone silent again, every single soul in the room in complete shock. The last two Death Eaters stopped by the double doors, holding it open for their master.

Lord Voldemort entered the Great Hall, his snakelike visage twisted into grim pleasure, his cape floating behind him mysteriously, as if it was just another part of him. At his feet slithered a huge big snake, easily as long as Hagrid was tall.

Lord Voldemort walked right into Great Hall, followed by his Death Eaters, straight past Professor McGonagall and right up to the staff table. He stopped, his eyes searching and finding Snape's. They stared at each other for almost ten seconds, before Voldemort turned around and looked out at the crowd of terrified, shocked students. He smiled, but it wasn't comforting. It was terrifying.

"Ah," he said, and his voice was so much like a snake's hissing Ginny felt her blood run cold, "it's good to be home."

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Thirty-One

On the twenty-fourth of May at roughly six-thirty, Lord Voldemort entered Hogwarts, bringing with him thirty of his loyal followers – the Death Eaters. He sent five of them after Rubeus Hagrid, who Voldemort knew would be one of his most challenging adversaries. Together, those five Death Eaters set fire to Hagrid cabin and trapped the half-giant inside. Or rather, they tried. The ensuing battle – for that's what it was – resulted in an unconscious Hagrid and five nearly dead Death Eaters. This happened at roughly six-forty.

At the same time, Harry Potter was racing through the halls of Hogwarts, the Marauder's Map held in his left hand and his wand in his right, gripped tight. Being light on his feet, the teenaged wizard hardly made a sound. He stopped at the base of the stairs leading up to the Entrance Hall, glancing down at the Map in his left hand.

Two Death Eaters stood guard outside the Great Hall, meaning he would have to take a different route if he wanted to get to the seventh floor, where Hermione was. Glancing at the Map again, Harry stared at the name 'Tom Riddle' and clenched his teeth. As much as he wanted to go in there right now and face off with his nemesis, he knew it would be futile. Besides, he wasn't going to do anything until he knew Hermione was safe. Glancing at the other significant name on the parchment, he took a deep breath.

"Don't do anything stupid Draco," he whispered, before turning around and running back into the dungeons.

(--)

The Great Hall was still deathly silent. Nobody dared to move even an inch, as if the entire Hall had had a Petrificus Totalus cast on it. Beside Draco, Pansy Parkinson was as still and silent as he had ever seen her. Draco glanced down the table, seeing Theodore Nott and his two goons, Crabbe and Goyle, all wearing smirks on their faces. Looking away, he glanced up at the looming figure standing at the head of the Great Hall – Lord Voldemort.

Severus Snape stood behind Voldemort; his wand out, with Professor Sprout lying sprawled at his feet. Surprise, surprise, Harry was right.

Or at least, that's how it looked. Draco hadn't been at all surprised when Snape had stunned the Herbology Professor, but the rest of the Hall had gasped in shock, quieting down almost immediately so as not to draw attention to themselves.

Now, with the Hall silent again, Draco watched as Voldemort turned to Snape and spoke:

"Severus," he hissed, "I presume you know the password to that muggle loving fools chamber, correct?"

"Yes my Lord," Snape replied.

"Then go now," Voldemort said, turning his eyes away from Snape to his audience, his terrifying smile blooming. "I have sent Macnair and two new recruits there already, but they will need the password to be granted access. Bring me Dumbledore, understood?"

"Yes my Lord," Snape repeated, before striding down the center aisle, past McGonagall and out of the Great Hall.

"Now then," Voldemort said, "bring me the hag. I'm in need of some good entertainment."

"My Lord," one of the other Death Eaters spoke up, and Draco wasn't surprised to hear his father's voice, "may I suggest something?"

Voldemort turned to face the speaking Death Eater – Lucius Malfoy – and waved him forward after a few seconds. The older Malfoy came forward and bowed at his Master's feet, before speaking.

"May I recommend that you allow my son to prove his loyalty to you," Lucius whispered humbly.

Voldemort's smile twisted into a smirk. "Very well," Voldemort said, then spoke louder. "Summon him."

Lucius stood up abruptly and bowed, before turning to face Draco. "Draco!" he shouted impatiently. "Get up here boy! Now!"

Draco felt his blood run cold as every eye in the Great Hall turned to him. He took a deep breath, before standing and walking slowly toward the dais where the staff table stretched out.

“Hurry up!” Lucius roared.

Draco picked up his pace a little, passing the Slytherin table and leaving it behind. He climbed the steps onto the raised platform and stood before his father.

“Son,” Lucius said, “it is time to prove your worth. Show me that you are indeed a Malfoy. Do not fail me.”

Draco swallowed and nodded.

“Who would you like my boy to kill my Lord?” Lucius asked, lowering his head in submission again.

“My Lord,” another Death Eater spoke, one of the few standing behind Voldemort. Draco’s head turned sharply in his direction, his eyes widening. He knew that voice. “May I speak?”

“Hurry up!” Voldemort replied, waving an arm impatiently.

The Death Eater came forward and stood before Draco, next to his father, before turning to Voldemort and bowing. Then he spoke:

“What would be more fitting for a Malfoy than to kill a member of the biggest Blood Traitor family there ever was,” he said, before standing up straight and pointing at the Gryffindor table. “The youngest of the Weasleys – Ginny Weasley.”

Voldemort laughed, a cold, hard laugh. Draco’s eyes narrowed and he turned to look at his father, who nodded his head in agreement. Draco couldn’t stand to look at them, so he turned to face the Gryffindor table, his eyes meeting Ginny’s. She was looking at him with pure hatred and he lowered his head, unable to stand it. The Death Eater speaking again brought his attention back to the situation at hand.

"I happen to know this particular Weasley would be perfect for Draco to dispose of and to prove his loyalty to you, my Lord. It would be poetic," he said, turning to Draco, "wouldn't it Draco?"

"It would," Draco whispered, clenching his fists, "Blaise."

(--)

Harry quickly found a secret passageway that would give him access to the higher levels of Hogwarts. He ran as fast as he could through the secret tunnels, worming his way through the brickwork, until he emerged on the third floor. He then made his way up to the fourth floor, and then the fifth, before he was forced to stop and duck into an alcove quickly. He pulled his Invisibility Cloak out of his back pocket and threw it around himself, just in time to watch the two Death Eaters walk past him. They were talking rather loudly, laughing.

"Did you see the stupid old hags face," one of them said, slapping his partner on the back, "all twisted in pain. I can't wait to tell my boy, he'll have a fit. He always hated that Arithmancy witch, and now she's just another dead body."

Harry clenched his hands tight, fighting the powerful urge to run out and kill them both. They'd killed her, Professor Vector, his Arithmancy instructor, without remorse. Sure, he hated the subject, but he didn't want to see her dead.

When they finally could not be heard any longer, Harry emerged from the alcove and resumed his trek to the seventh floor. He reached it in record time, his feet pounding on the floor as he ran, full out, towards the old portrait of the Fat Lady that concealed the entrance to Gryffindor Tower. Stealth be damned, he had to get to Hermione as fast as possible, before something happened to her.

Panting, he rounded the corner into the corridor that led to the Fat Lady's portrait, only to find it torn apart and gaping, the entrance exposed. Taking a deep breath, his heart pounding in his ears, he ran as fast as he could down the corridor.

(--)

Looking back on things, Hermione wasn't sure exactly what she was doing when the Death Eaters attacked. The thing that really stood out, the event which was the start of her memories of that night, was Neville pulling her down and under the table when the door behind the Fat Lady exploded. She vividly remembered the screams of her fellow housemates echoing in her ears as she hid under the table.

"Stay here!" Neville whispered to her, before he started to crawl across the floor, behind the couch that dominated one side of the common room, hidden from view of the Death Eaters.

Hermione peeked over the table and watched as the black clad Death Eaters – two of them – with horrific skull masks entered the common room. She saw Ron Weasley and his friends standing by their table, wands drawn, but frozen in shock. The rest of the room was erupting in chaos.

Hermione watched as the first Death Eater raised his wand and take aim, his wand pointed directly at the fleeing back of a first year. She didn't hear him speak, so he must have used a non-verbal spell, but the next thing she knew the girl was motionless on the floor. Her friends gathered around her, crying and looking up with terrified faces at the looming evil.

The Death Eater pointed his wand again, but before he could cast a spell –

"Expelliarmus!"

- His wand went flying out of his hand and was sent high into the air, before it came crashing down a few feet away from him. The Death Eater cursed and dove for the wand, whilst his partner turned his attention the source of the voice.

The Death Eater stared at the sofa, his eyes narrowing behind the skull mask. Hermione ducked under the table again and looking pleadingly at Neville, who was crouched with his back against the sofa.

"They know where you are," she mouthed silently. He frowned at her and she repeated herself, hoping he would understand this time. He nodded and started crawling again.

Hermione peeked over the top of the table again just in time to see the second Death Eater raise his wand. The sofa exploded in a mixture of cloth, fluff and plywood. Hermione winced, holding her breath and dropping down again. Neville was crawling out of the mess, wood and bits of fluff covering him.

"Run!" she mouthed, but he wasn't looking at her.

"Look what we have here," the Death Eater spoke for the first time, his voice deep and rumbling. "A little wannabe hero."

"Neville run!" Hermione shouted, not caring if it drew attention to herself anymore. She couldn't watch her friend die.

"Crucio!" The Death Eater shouted, but he ended up missing when Ron Weasley came out of nowhere and tackled him to the ground.

The Death Eater grunted as he hit the floor and Ron Weasley went rolling over him. Ron ended up lying in front of her, the table between them. He groaned and got up, catching her eye. She smiled her thanks and he grinned a rather scared smile at her.

Unfortunately, the other Death Eater was back, having retrieved his wand. He pointed it at Ron, but before he could utter a spell a bright flash of red light erupted behind him and he fell flat on his face, unconscious. The entire common room went silent, the screams and crying of the younger years fading as everyone turned to face the doorway.

Harry Potter stood in the doorway, his wand aimed, his eyes narrowed in anger. The last Death Eater stood up, turning to face Harry, and although Hermione couldn't see it, he was smirking. No doubt he thought he'd get in good with his Lord when he brought him Harry Potter's head. He was mistaken.

"Potter!" The Death Eater laughed. "I was hoping I'd meet you."

“Interesting,” Harry said, though by the tone of his voice you could tell he thought it clearly was anything but interesting, “but unfortunately for you, you’re in my way.”

“Oh,” the Death Eater laughed, “is that so? What are you doing to do? You’re just a child.”

“That’s your first mistake,” Harry said, “but it’s not the one that’s going to get you in the end. That would be your second mistake.”

“And what’s that?” The Death Eater asked in a tone that suggested he was humouring Harry.

“That would be turning your back on your opponent,” Harry said.

“*Stupefy!*” Neville roared, pointing his wand at the Death Eater’s, whose eyes widened slightly before he fell down, mirroring his partner.

The entire common room was silent as Neville picked himself up and Harry entered the room proper. It was highly likely that most people could hardly believe their eyes. After all, the supposed next Dark Lord had just saved them all from a duo of Death Eaters, which was not something one expected to see.

Hermione didn’t care about any of that though. She’d just gone through a terrifying scene, something she had not expected to have to face this soon, and what she needed the most now was to just wrap her arms around her boyfriend and bask in his presence.

That so, Hermione quickly stood up and ran around the table, dashing into Harry’s opening arms. She buried her head into his chest as he wrapped his arms around her, nuzzling her hair.

“Oh Harry,” she cried, tears of relief in her eyes, “I was so scared.”

“Shh,” Harry cooed, rubbing her back, “it’s okay. I’m here now.”

“I knew you’d come,” she said, clutching at his robes. “I just knew it.”

They spent the next few seconds like that, before finally the silence that had descended onto the stunned common room was broken:

“Erm,” Ron said, “what the *hell* is going on?”

Harry patted Hermione on the back before gently disentangling himself from her, although he stayed close and grabbed her hand. He looked around the common room; seeing everyone’s shocked faces staring back at him, before he turned his head slightly meet Neville’s eyes.

“Good job Neville,” he said, “do me a favour?”

“Sure thing Harry,” Neville replied.

“Tie these two Death Eater’s up with some strong robe,” Harry said, “and make it really tight. A Body-Bind wouldn’t go amiss either.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Neville said, moving way to do the job.

“Hey!” Ron shouted, red in the face. “I said - what the *hell* is going on here?”

“I heard you,” Harry replied, turning to face the enraged Gryffindor. “Listen everyone,” Harry went on, speaking to the entire common room. “I need you all to remain calm, okay? Voldemort has invaded Hogwarts - ”

“What did you say?” Ron asked, eyes wide.

“But he’s not – I mean, he’s dead, isn’t he?” A third year asked, speaking timidly.

“No,” Harry said, “he isn’t.”

“But you killed him,” the third year argued.

“I didn’t,” Harry said.

“So it’s true then?” Katie Bell said, speaking for the first time. “He’s really back? You weren’t lying?”

“No, I wasn’t,” Harry said, growing impatient. “Look - we really don’t have time for this. You’re all sitting ducks here, we need to get you someplace safe.”

“Like I’m going to trust you,” Ron said loudly, “this is probably a set up. You just want to lure us to him, don’t you?”

“Oh please,” Hermione snapped, moving forward and getting in Ron’s face, “Listen to what you’re saying. Don’t be an idiot. Harry just saved all our lives and you still can’t trust him?”

“He - ”

“So what do we do?” Katie Bell asked, coming forward and interrupting Ron.

“We need to get you all to a safe place,” Harry said, giving her a small smile of thanks.

“But where?” Katie asked. “I can’t think of any place that’ll be safe from him.”

“I know a place,” Harry replied, “It’s not far from here either. It’s called the Room of Requirement. It’s a secret room that can be anything you need it to be.”

“Okay,” Katie said, “where is it?”

“It’s on this floor,” Harry said, “just across from Barnabas the Barmy’s tapestry. What you need to do is walk past that spot and think about what you need – in our case it’s a good place to hide a lot of people – and then it should appear. Got it?”

“Yeah,” Katie said, nodding. “I’ve got it.”

“Great then,” Harry said, looking around the room, “okay, can you take first through third years? I’ll follow with the rest, okay?”

“Okay,” Katie agreed, before moving away to gather her charges.

Harry turned back to Hermione, ignoring Ron, who was glowering at them, but not saying a word. Harry pulled her close and kissed her softly, before pulling out his Invisibility Cloak.

“I want you to wear this,” Harry said, “okay?”

“What?” Hermione gasped, surprised. “No, I can’t. You should give it to someone more important.”

“You are important,” Harry said, handing it to her whether she liked it or not, “so don’t argue with me. Take it.”

Hermione bit her lip, but nodded. She’d wear it for now. Neville returned at that point, pointing out his handy work with a grin:

“What do you think?” he asked. “Good enough?”

“Perfect,” Harry said.

“I’m ready,” Katie said, appearing at his shoulder.

“Right,” Harry said, “Neville, will you go with Katie, Keep them safe, okay? We’ll be right behind you.”

Neville nodded and then joined Katie in leading the younger years from the common room, heading to the Room of Requirement. Harry glanced around at the rest of the students in the common room.

“Okay,” he said, “everyone get ready. We’ll be leaving soon.”

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Thirty-Two

The Room of Requirement was packed with most of the residents of Gryffindor tower, but due to the room's nature, no matter how many students arrived the room just kept on expanding. When Harry arrived with the rest of the Gryffindor students they could just barely fit, but within seconds the room had grown to almost Great Hall magnitude.

"Wow," one first year gasped, "this place is amazing."

Harry, followed by Hermione and Ron, quickly found Katie Bell and Neville sitting around a fireplace in some comfy looking chairs. Harry raised an eyebrow at Katie as they arrived and she smiled guiltily. The room would only pay heed to one person at a time, and as Katie was the one to activate it, only she could control what happened in the room.

"This place is really cool," Katie said as Harry, Hermione and Ron sat down in three chairs that magically appeared around the fire. "How'd you find it?"

"Never mind that," Harry said, getting down to business, "we have more important things to deal with."

"Right," Katie replied, blushing slightly, "sorry."

"No problem," Harry said, "I'll tell you after we survive this. For now, we have to figure out what to do next. We're safe here, but the rest of the school isn't – and that includes Dumbledore. He's a sitting duck right now."

"But he's in the Headmaster's chamber, isn't he?" Katie asked. "You Know Who can't get to him in there, he needs the password."

"Or someone who knows it," Harry said hotly.

"Someone - "

"Harry," Hermione said, knowing what he was thinking, "I know how you feel, but I really don't think Snape is a traitor."

“What?” Neville said, blinking in confusion. “Professor Snape?”

“I never trusted that bloody git,” Ron snarled.

“Looks like we have something in common,” Harry said, catching Ron’s eye.

“I’m not so sure I trust you either,” Ron said, but without his usual anger and vigour.

“Fair enough,” Harry said, stopping Hermione before she could have a go at the red head, “just as long as you don’t let it get in the way of what we need to do.”

“Which is?” Katie asked, getting back to the point.

“I’m going to contact the Order,” Harry said, casting a glance at the flames burning in the fireplace, “and tell them what’s going on. Most likely they know already, but just in case.”

“What’s the order?” Katie asked.

“The Order of the Phoenix,” Ron answered, “a group of witches and wizard that are dedicated to fighting You Know Who.”

“And you know these people?” Katie asked, her eyes wide.

“Yeah,” Harry said, “of course I do. Professor Dumbledore is the leader and Professor McGonagall and Snape are also members, although I think Snape is a spy for Voldemort.”

“So what do we do whilst you’re doing that?” Katie queried, looking over at the rest of the Gryffindors, who were just sitting around aimlessly, looking worried.

“You sit tight,” Harry said, “and stay safe. Other than that, you can’t do anything right now.”

“What are you waiting for then?” Ron demanded.

“Katie,” Harry said, turning to face the older girl, “can you summon some Floo powder for me.”

“Sure,” Katie replied, and the next second a bag of the special powder appeared in her hand.

She handed it to Harry, who muttered a ‘thanks’ and dropped to his knees in front of the fire. He opened the bag and pulled out a handful, before tossing it into the fire. Then he stuck his head into the flames and said:

“Grimmauld Place.”

Whilst Harry was contacting the Order, the rest of the group sat around him silently. Hermione was watching him and trying to figure out what was going on, as she could only hear one side of the conversation, but at least he was talking to someone. Katie had walked off to comfort some of the younger years, adopting a very motherly aura.

“So you’re dating him?” Ron asked, out of the blue.

Hermione turned to him, surprised, before nodding. “Yeah, I am.”

“What is it with you girls?” Ron prodded. “Is that Slytherin bad boy thing really that attractive? Why do you all fall for them?”

“Excuse me,” Hermione said, growing irritated already, “but you know absolutely nothing about Harry.”

“That’s what my sister said about Malfoy,” Ron said, “and look what happened to her.”

“Hermione’s right,” Neville said, joining the conversation, “Harry isn’t like that. I know how you feel, I was sceptical too, but Harry is different. If you spent some time with him you’d realise that. It’s not something I can explain; he just has this aura around him. You can’t help but trust him.”

“I’ll never trust a Slytherin,” Ron said.

“You never know,” Harry said, hearing the last bit of the conversation when he pulled his head out of the fire, “we just might surprise you.

For one, I don't see your sister here. She's probably in the Great Hall right now, with Voldemort."

"What?" Ron sat up, looking around wildly. "No, she was in her room. I sent one of her room mates up to get here before we left, I'm sure they'll be here any minute."

"You mean that room mate?" Harry said, pointing to the frantic girl that was heading right for them, wide eyed.

Ron stood up to meet her, looking over her shoulder as if he expected Ginny to be right behind her. Of course, she wasn't.

"She's not there!" the girl cried, coming to a stop before him, panting.

"What do you mean not there?" Ron demanded. "She hardly leaves her room, anymore, of course she's there!"

"Erm," Hermione said, speaking up, "Ron, I saw Ginny today. She was with Parker and Lee. They left the common room at about six."

"No," Ron moaned, grabbing a hand full of his hair and grinding his teeth together, "she can't be...not Ginny – not her too!"

"Relax," Harry said, "she'll be fine."

"Fine!" Ron exploded, turning sharply and glaring at Harry. "She's in the Great Hall with You Know Fuckin Who you asshole!"

"She's also in there with Draco," Harry said, "and he won't let anything happen to her."

"Oh great," Ron said hysterically, laughing, "that's a real comfort. Let the guy that broke her heart protect her. Ha!"

"Harry," Neville broke in, "what are we going to do? We can't just leave Ginny in there."

"What did the Order say?" Hermione asked.

"I talked with Sirius," Harry said, "and it's just like I said, the already knew. They're mobilizing right now, but they can't Apparate into

Hogwarts so it might take them a while to get here, as they'll have to Apparate into Hogsmeade."

"And what do we do?" Neville asked.

"I'll tell you," Harry said, turning around to face the rest of the Gryffindor house.

"Listen up everyone!" Harry said, loudly. The room went silent. "I've just contacted a group of witches and wizard that will be coming to our rescue soon, but they're going to need our help. Don't worry; I won't force any of you to do anything you don't want to do. So any of you that are fifth year or above, if you want to help fight, come talk to me. At seven thirty we'll head down to the Great Hall and ambush the Death Eaters and Voldemort. So, like I said, if you want to help, come talk to me."

"I'll help," Katie said, coming forward.

"Me too," another added.

"Us too," Dean Thomas said, stepping up and dragging Seamus with him.

All in all, Harry ended up with twelve extra fighters, not including Ron, Neville and Hermione.

"Okay," Harry said, speaking to the room again, "the rest of you will be safe here. Just stay put and someone will come get you when it's all done, okay? Good."

Harry turned to his gathered fighters and ran a hand through his hair.

"I want to thank you guys for volunteering," Harry said, "but don't put yourselves in too much danger. If you can't handle it, get out of there. It's not worth getting killed over."

"I'm not going to run," Ron said.

"Me either," Neville said, "I'm with you all the way Harry."

"I know Neville," Harry said, smiling at him, "thanks. Well, we have a bit of time before we have to go, so why don't you all go relax or talk to your friends or whatever. I'll call you when it's time."

The group dispersed. Ron and Neville went and sat around the fireplace, staring into the flames, both boys trying to temper their desire to rescue Ginny right away. Hermione took Harry's hand and squeezed it reassuringly. Katie lingered, looking at her feet. Harry shared a curious look with Hermione, before Hermione squeezed his hand again, kissed him on the cheek and went to join Ron and Neville, leaving Harry alone with the Gryffindor.

"What is it Katie?" Harry asked.

"Oh," Katie breathed, her cheeks colouring slightly, "I'm sorry. I just...you're going to think I'm awful for this, but I want to say this anyway."

"What?" Harry pressed.

"I...I always thought you were really strange," Katie stuttered, "I mean, odd, you know? Everybody always said you could be the next Dark Lord and well...I guess I kinda believed it. It's awful, I know, but I did. I just could never figure you out, and I guess that scared me a little. You can be a pretty intimidating person, you know."

"I guess," Harry said, raising an eyebrow.

"But I was wrong wasn't I?" Katie said. "Everyone was. I can see that you're a nice guy, even if you are a little mysterious and aloof. I never expected it, but you saved us from those Death Eaters, and I can see how much you love Hermione just by how you look at her. So, I just wanted to say I'm sorry for doubting you and not believing you when you said He was back."

"Thank you," Harry said, unable to help the grin that bloomed on his face.

Katie smiled bashfully at him, before waving stupidly and walking away. Harry watched her go, unable to keep the grin off his face. Katie would never know how much her words had affected him. Harry

remembered the way Katie had looked at him when he had tried to find out the identity of her attacker and knew that if she could change her opinion of him, then most people could as well. For the first time in his life he actually realised he wanted people to like him, no matter how much he pretended to not care. Underneath it all, he just wanted people to love him.

“Harry,” Hermione said, clicking her fingers in front of his face, “you okay?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, still grinning, turning to face his girlfriend.

Hermione smiled at him bemusedly. “I’ve never seen you smile like that before,” she said, “what did Katie say to you?”

“Never mind Hermione,” Harry said, grabbing her around the waist and pulling her closer, leaning down to look her in the eye. She giggled, cheeks flushed. “It doesn’t matter anymore. I love you, you know.”

“I know,” Hermione whispered. “I love you too.”

And when he kissed her, the entire world seemed to fall away. For that moment, it was just the two of them.

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Thirty-Three

Ginny sat as still as she could, frozen in fear. Images that she had subconsciously tried to suppress since her first year started to flash into her mind: Tom Riddle's spirit forcing her into the Chamber of Secrets. The dark and dank Chamber and the monkey faced Salazar Slytherin statue looming above her as the giant Basilisk slithered around her. Tom Riddle's form appearing before her very eyes, his handsome face grinning at her with a terrifying coldness. Tom Riddle clasping his cold hands around her face and sucking the life out of her, grinning the whole time.

Ginny started to shake, tears appearing in her eyes. She hung her head, trying to hide, ashamed of her weakness. Clutching the table before her as hard as she could, Ginny tried to calm herself. She didn't want to draw attention to herself, not one bit.

Had she been watching the scene unravelling at the staff table, she would have seen the Death Eater (Blaise Zabini) coming right towards her. Unfortunately, she was too wrapped up in her own terror to notice, at least until he was upon her. Blaise grabbed her hair and pulled her to her feet, making her gasp out in shock and turn her tear stained face to his skull mask.

"Come on Weasel," Blaise cooed, "it's time to meet your Lord and Master."

"Hey!" Ellen got up, protesting. "Leave her alone!"

Blaise let go off Ginny, who fell to her knees beside the staff table, sobbing. He turned to face Ginny's protesting roommate, grinning under his mask.

"And why would I do that you filthy Mudblood?" Blaise mocked, laughing.

"Because I said so!" Ellen said, hands on her hips, glaring at him.

Blaise just laughed harder, before lashing out with his fist and hitting her right in the nose. Ellen gasped (and was echoed by the entire Hall, minus the Death Eaters) and fell to the floor, her nose busted,

blooding pouring down in gushes. Kate rushed him, but he shoved her away easily and pulled out his wand, aiming it at the downed girl.

"You better learn to watch your mouth Mudblood," Blaise said, "it'll get you in trouble. *Crucio!*"

Ellen screamed, her body writing on the floor below Blaise, tears leaking from her eyes. Blaise laughed as he tortured the girl, before dispelling the Cruciatus curse and placing his boot under the girl's body, rolling her onto her back. He grinned down at her though his mask, before placing his boot onto her face and grinding down, further breaking her nose. Ellen shrieked in pain again, but her screams quickly turned to sobs. Blaise let up, chuckling, before spitting on her. He then grabbed Ginny's arm, lugging her to her feet, and started to drag her over to the high table. Kate dropped to her knees by her friend, crying as well, and hugged her best friend.

Ginny had become lost in her own mind, removed from everything, in a desperate attempt to escape the situation she was in. She barely heard or even realised what was happening to her roommate. She was being lugged around, that she knew, but she wasn't conscious of what was actually happening. It was like she'd been temporarily removed from her body, unable to do anything.

(--)

Blaise dragged Ginny to the staff table and then let go, letting her fall to her knees at his feet. He smirked at Draco, before walking past the blond Slytherin and joining the ranks of the other Death Eaters again.

Lucius Malfoy turned to his son, who was staring at Ginny sadly. Lucius scowled and grabbed his son by the shoulders, turning him to face him. He shook him, getting the young Malfoys attention.

"Listen to me boy," Lucius hissed, "if you do not do this now, you will never be accepted. You will be labelled a weak fool and most likely, you will be killed. Make me proud son. Kill the Blood Traitor now."

Draco gulped, but nodded and turned from his father's grip. He grabbed wand and raised it, pointing it at Ginny. He took a few steps

forward, so that his wand almost touched Ginny's lowered head. He was so close he could hear her quiet sobs.

"I'm sorry Ginny," he whispered, and at that moment Ginny finally came back to herself.

Her head shot up, catching his eye. Tears streaked down her face and her mouth was open, twisted into a pitiful expression. She looked a mess.

"Please," she sobbed, "please Draco...I...please don't do this...I'm sorry...I'll do anything...please..."

"It's too late Ginny," Draco said, "there's nothing either of us can do. It's way too late. But know this – I love you and I'm so sorry."

"No," Ginny moaned.

Draco looked back at his father, at Blaise, and at Voldemort. His father nodded, his eyes narrowed. Blaise was grinning underneath his mask. Lord Voldemort just looked on with slightly impatience and mild curiosity. Draco turned back to Ginny and raised his wand. He took a breath.

"Avada Kedavra!"

But at the last second, Draco spun around and aimed his wand at Voldemort. The flash of green light streaked across the room, but before it could strike its target, a chair flew into the way and exploded. The Great Hall was silent once more. It was like the entire room was caught in the eye of a storm, a sort of temporary immobility where no one really knows what to do or say, or if what they saw really happened. But then it was over.

"Get him!" Voldemort roared, his nostrils flaring.

Draco grabbed Ginny's arm and dragged her to her feet, attempting a futile escape, but was quickly knocked down with a Crucio. He fell with a cry of pain, his entire body twitching, and Ginny fell with him.

Draco rolled over, looking up at the caster of the Crucio, his very own father. Lucius Malfoy was glaring with unrivalled anger at his son, who was gasping from the pain of the torture curse. The elder Malfoy raised his wand again and cast another Crucio, making Draco cry out again.

“Bring him to me!” Voldemort commanded.

“Yes my Lord,” Lucius replied, grabbing Draco by the scruff of his robes and dragging him to his Master.

He dropped Draco onto his knees in front of the most feared wizard of all time, but Draco could hardly even kneel under the tremendous pain his body had just gone through, so he fell forward, sprawled at Voldemort’s feet.

“Pick him up!” Voldemort ordered.

Lucius grabbed Draco’s hair and pulled him up, so that he was locking eyes with the heir of Slytherin.

“You dare to defy me boy?” Voldemort hissed. “Me – the heir of Slytherin himself – the Dark Lord Voldemort.”

“Screw...you...” Draco gasped, glaring at the Dark Lord.

Voldemort raised his own wand lazily and the next thing Draco knew, he was in more pain than he had ever felt in his entire life. Voldemort’s Cruciatus Curse made his father’s feel like tickling. Voldemort dismissed the curse and Draco slumped forwards, wheezing.

“Do you understand my power now?” Voldemort said. “Do you understand why the entire world will fall at my feet and worship me? Tell me boy – who do you possibly think could stand against me and even hope to win?”

“...Harry...” Draco said, forcing his head to rise and locking eyes with Voldemort.

Voldemort laughed, the same cold harsh laugh he had heard before. Voldemort laugh soon turned into a snarl and he cast another Crucio on Draco.

"Your pain can be over boy," Voldemort said. "All you have to do is admit that I am the greatest wizard to ever draw breath. Admit that I am your Master and beg for my forgiveness!"

"Sorry," Draco gasped, "but I'm not...a spineless loser...like my father..."

Voldemort smirked, his snake like visage twisted more than ever before. He laughed again and nodded to Lucius, wordlessly instructing the man to move out of the way. Lucius dragged Draco out of the way as the Dark Lord stood, his robes flowing behind him eerily. Voldemort looked down at Draco, who was glaring up at him.

"You will bow at my feet boy," Voldemort said, "I can assure you of that."

Then Voldemort turned his eyes to Ginny, who was still lying on the floor, only a few feet away. Voldemort snapped his fingers at Blaise, who immediately rushed forward.

"Bring me the Blood Traitor," Voldemort commanded.

"Yes my Lord," Blaise replied, before rushing over to Ginny and grabbing a handful of her hair again, yanking her over to Voldemort.

He dropped her at Voldemort feet and then rushed back into line. Voldemort turned to look at Draco, who was staring at him wide eyed. Voldemort raised his wand ("No!" Draco exploded) and cast another Crucio. Ginny started shrieking on the floor, jerking like she was being electrocuted.

"No!" Draco snarled through his teeth clenched. "Stop it!"

"Beg to be forgiven!" Voldemort roared. "Tell all here that I am the Dark Lord, your Master! Submit to me and she will no longer have to suffer!"

Draco glared at him, tears in his own eyes now, as he fought between his pride and Ginny's well being. He hung his head, tears leaking out now, fists clenched.

"....Alright." Draco moaned. "I'll admit it, just stop it..."

Voldemort released Ginny from the Crucio, leaving her sobbing on the floor, shaking violently.

"Let him go Lucius," Voldemort instructed.

The elder Malfoy did, letting Draco free. Draco climbed shakily to his feet, the pain of all the Crucio's he'd suffered still causing him great pain.

"Kneel at my feet boy!" Voldemort commanded.

Draco clenched his teeth, but dropped to his knees. Voldemort laughed – and was echoed by the rest of his Death Eaters.

"Now beg for my forgiveness!" Voldemort hollered, laughing his hard laugh.

"...Please...please forgive me...my Lord..." Draco whispered.

"Louder!" Voldemort directed, smirking at Draco. "I want the entire Great Hall to echo with your words! I want all to hear you beg my forgiveness!"

Draco sucked in a deep breath, clenching his fist even tighter. He thought of Ginny's face, screaming and crying with agony, and hardened his resolve. He wouldn't let her go through that pain. Not again. His pride be damned!

"Please," Draco said, loudly this time, "Please forgive me my Lord."

Voldemort laughed again. "That's right," he said, "beg me like the worm you are. Bow your head to me boy!"

Draco did as order, bowing his head.

"Kiss my boot!" Voldemort demanded, sticking it under Draco's nose.

Draco flushed, but with the image of Ginny in his mind, he pressed his lips to the tip of Voldemort's boot. His dignity was being stripped from him, but if he could just hold out, Draco knew he would be able to keep Ginny safe. *Come on Harry*, he thought. *I can't stall much longer.*

"Now then, I'm going to give you a choice."

Draco looked up at him questioningly.

"Let's see how brave you really are," Voldemort said. "I am going to torture someone and you get to choose who. So let's see, who shall it be? I know," he pointed his wand at Ginny, "her?"

"No!" Draco shouted, lowering his head when Voldemort laughed.

"Of course not," Voldemort mocked, "how silly of me. Then that leaves only one person – you!"

Draco glared at him.

"That's right," Voldemort said. "So who will it be? Will you be the brave boy you are striving to become? Or will your Slytherin side reveal itself? Who will it be?"

"...Me..." Draco whispered.

"Sorry?"

"I said me!" Draco shouted. "I chose me. Crucio me all you want, I won't let you hurt Ginny!"

"Like you could stop me," Voldemort laughed.

To prove a point, he zapped Ginny with another Crucio. Draco fought out of his father's grip and dived in the way, intercepting the curse. His body fell sprawled over Ginny, covering her. His entire body was sent into a spasm of pain and Voldemort laughed.

"How noble, but utterly futile," Voldemort said. "What do you hope to achieve boy?"

"I'm not..." Draco panted. "I won't let you...hurt her."

"Then you will be driven insane," Voldemort said, smirking, "is that what you want?"

"If that's what it takes," Draco ground out, turning to face Voldemort again and getting to his feet, shaking.

"So be it," Voldemort raised his wand and pointed it at Draco.

However, before he could cast any spell, the double doors of the Great Hall exploded and the cavalry arrived.

(--)

Piccolo999

Chapter Thirty-Four

If you were to ask anyone present in the Great Hall the meaning of the word chaos, they would have been able to answer better than anyone in the entire world. Why? Because that was the only word that could be used to describe the scene that was unfolding before them – pure, complete, and absolute chaos.

The members of the Order of the Phoenix (and even a few Aurors) stormed the room with full force. The Death Eaters responded in kind, charging into battle. Spells and curses of all kinds flew in every direction. It was only through skill and a vast amount of luck that the entire student body of Hogwarts wasn't killed or seriously hurt in the crossfire.

When Harry arrived in the Great Hall, leading the few volunteers he had, the battle was already in full force. He ordered his fellows into battle, instructing them to try and keep the rest of the students safe. Harry had his own mission.

He ran into the fray, dodging spells when needed, his eyes darting every which way for some sign of Draco. Voldemort would have to wait, because he was dead set on finding out if his best friend was still alive.

(--)

As the chaos erupted around them, Draco had fallen to his knees with relief, hardly able to stand anymore from the amount of pain coursing through his body. He turned his head to look at Ginny, who was curled up in a ball and sobbing behind him. He shuffled over to her on his knees and laid a hand gently on her shaking shoulders. She jumped and turned startled eyes to him, her brown orbs shining through tears.

"Ginny," Draco murmured, "it's okay now, we're going to be fine."

Ginny started sobbing anew, but to Draco's surprise, she crawled forward and buried her head into his lap. He started combing his fingers through her hair in an attempt to soothe her, his eyes darting around to keep a look out.

"So you really fell for the Blood Traitor," Blaise's mocking voice taunted from behind him, "how pathetic."

Draco turned on his knees, pulling Ginny with him. She raised her eyes, confused, but when she saw Blaise, they widened and she buried her head back into Draco's chest.

"I looked up to you, you know?" Blaise said. "When we were younger. I thought, this is a guy who knows what he wants, who's proud of who he is. But your nothing but a pathetic Gryffindor, aren't you?"

"I'll never be a Gryffindor Blaise," Draco said, locking eyes with his former friend, "but at least I'm not a back stabbing, ass kissing loser like you."

"Is that what you think?" Blaise asked, twirling his wand between his fingers, showing off.

"I don't think," Draco said. "I know. You're the Death Eater Harry and I have been looking for all this year. But what I don't get is, what exactly was your mission?"

"I suppose I can tell you now," Blaise replied, "but it's not as if it'll do you any good. I'm going to finish you off, you know? Anyway, my original mission was to take out Dumbledore. Or at least, try my best at it. The Dark Lord told me he didn't expect me to pull off the task, but he at least wanted me to cause some trouble at Hogwarts. But then I overheard you and Harry talking about something called Horcruxes and I got curious."

"You heard us?" Draco asked, surprised.

"Yeah," Blaise said, "you're not as smart as you thought, huh? When I told the Dark Lord about these Horcrux thingies he became very interested. He asked me how I knew about them and I told him I'd heard you and Harry talking about them. Anyway, after that he told me to keep a low profile and concentrate on my other job. Seems he thought my first job wasn't necessary anymore, and I guess he was right. That dumb ass Dumbledore got himself hurt all on his own."

"Second job?"

"Finding a way to get the Dark Lord into Hogwarts," Blaise answered, "and as you can see – mission successful."

"How'd you do it?"

"That I'm not going to tell you," Blaise said, before twirling his wand one last time and pointing it at Draco. "Now it's time to finish this. I'm sorry you had to turn out like this Malfoy, I really wanted you to join with me, but it looks like you've chosen your side. She must really be a good fuckin' lay."

Draco's eyes narrowed when Blaise laughed, his fist tightening and feeling the cool wood of his wand against his skin.

"*Avada* - "

"*Stupefy!*" Another voice roared before Blaise could finish the killing curse.

"Harry?" Draco gasped, looking over the stunned shoulder of the collapsing Blaise, but when the body fell, it wasn't Harry standing there. It was Ron Weasley.

"Ginny!" Ron yelled, running forward and collapsing to his knees beside them. He locked eyes with Draco and glared, before reaching out and prying Ginny away from Draco.

Draco let him, watching sadly as Ginny embraced her brother, still crying. Ron rubbed soothing circles in her back, murmuring how it was all going to be all right now. The Order was here.

Draco stood up shakily, his body protesting, but his mind overruling. He looked around and found Harry standing with a bushy haired girl and another boy. He grinned and gave a lazy wave.

"Hey," Draco said.

"Draco," Harry said, before stepping forward and embracing his friend.

Draco blushed and brushed him away, flustered.

"Quit it you big girl," Draco said.

"It's good to see you," Harry said, "I was sure you'd do something stupid."

"I did," Draco said, running a shaking hand through his messy silver hair. "I feel like I was hit with a thousand stunners, but I'm unable to fall unconscious."

Harry shook his head. "I'm just glad you're okay," he said.

"Well," Draco groaned, suddenly feeling a spasm of pain in his chest when he took in a deep breath. "Oof, I think I spoke too soon."

"Come on," Harry said, putting Draco's shoulder around his own. "Let's get you out of here. Neville, a little help."

"...Okay," Neville said, coming forward a little reluctantly and putting Draco's other arm around his shoulders.

"Hermione," Harry said, "help Weasley with Ginny please."

"Sure," Hermione said, doing as told.

"Ah," a cold and unsympathetic voice said, "now this was a little encounter I was more than looking forward too. We meet again Mister Potter."

(--)

Harry went stiff for a second and was echoed by everyone else. No one moved even an inch, except for Harry, who untangled himself from Draco and turned, spotting the source of the cruel voice. Lord Voldemort was standing before him; his wand out and his twisted face alight with cruelty.

"Voldemort," Harry returned.

Voldemort locked eyes with him and Harry felt his scar burst to life. He grit his teeth against the pain and watched Voldemort smirk at him. Harry glared and sent out a wave of Legilimency, probing into

Voldemort's mind, intent on making the evil wizard as uncomfortable as he was making him. He encountered firm blocks, which made Voldemort laugh out loud.

"Trying to get into my mind Potter?" Voldemort taunted. "How pitiful you are."

"Then let's fight," Harry said, ignoring the pain his scar was causing him. "I mean, I think I have the winning tally, don't I? Let's see, what's the score? Four to nothing, right?"

Voldemort's mouth twisted into an ugly snarl and Harry smirked, glad to find he could anger the wizard.

"Insolent brat," Voldemort ground out through clenched teeth, "you got lucky."

"Four times?" Harry marvelled, smirking even more. "Wow, I must be the luckiest person in the world. How about we try it again, see who's 'lucky' this time? Who's betting it'll be me? Anyone?"

"Harry," Hermione whispered, but Harry could hear her clearly, "is it really a good idea to taunt him?"

"Come on *Tom*," Harry said, emphasising the wizard's true name on purpose, "let's see what you got."

"How dare you use that name!" Voldemort raged, his wand flying into the air faster than Harry expected. A flash of green erupted from it.

"Shit!" Harry cried as he flew to the floor in a sloppy attempt to dodge. He certainly wasn't expecting Voldemort to be this fast. He rolled to his feet and drew his own wand; only to find he had to dodge again as another curse flew at him. Sweating profusely, he came to a stop on one knee and looked up, expecting another curse, but this time it wasn't heading his way. Voldemort was aiming at his friends!

"No!" Harry roared, his magical energy flying out around him with the force of his will, creating a sort of shockwave of magical energy. Harry had never heard of anything like this happening in his entire life, but he was certainly grateful. The shockwave knocked everyone over

and caused Voldemorts killing curse to veer slightly of course, striking a chair and turning it to ash.

Voldemort spun back to face him, eyes wide. Harry was already up, wand aimed:

“*STUPEFY!*” Harry shouted.

“*AVADA KEDAVRA!*” Voldemort voiced at the same time.

The two spells collided mid way, creating a link between Harrys wand and Voldemorts. The two brother wands formed a link, a bright solid golden line of magic. Harry gripped his wand with all his might as it started to vibrate and watched as Voldemort did the same. His eyes locked with his nemesis, finding the wizard glaring at him with pure loathing. Then his feet left the ground.

“What’s going on?” Harry heard Ron yell, but nobody answered.

The entire Great Hall was silent – the chaos over. Every eye was turned upward as Harry and Voldemort flew further up into the air, until they were suspended halfway between the roof and floor. Priori Incantatem continued, the magical link breaking away and forming a sphere of gold light around Harry and Voldemort. The wands shaking continued and Harry held on tight.

But then, through the golden light surrounding him, Harry noticed the entire audience shift as footsteps echoed into the Great Hall. Harry turned his head around and looked beyond the light, his eyes seeing a sight he thought he would never see again. It was Dumbledore.

“Dumbledore!” Neville cheered, and Harry felt a grin bloom on his face.

Dumbledore strode into the Great Hall, his robes billowing about him, and looked up at the Priori Incantatem bubble above him. His eyes twinkled as he raised his hands (wand held aloft) and waved.

The bubble began to vibrate just like the wands. Harry felt himself slowly falling to the floor again. He met Voldemorts shocked and angry visage from across and smirked at the wizard. His feet hit the

floor and the bubble burst, blinding everyone. In that instant, Harry heard Voldemort bellow:

“Retreat!”

And when Harry opened his eyes, he saw Voldemort whip his cloak about him and vanish. Harry’s eyes widened, before he spun around in a circle and scanned the entire room. Death Eaters fled, running for the door. The Order leapt into action, stunning anyone moving.

“Harry!” Hermione yelled, before crashing into his arms. He hugged her back, his eyes finding Dumbledore’s over her bushy head. The Headmaster smiled cheerfully at him, eyes twinkling.

“Harry, are you okay?” Neville was asking.

“What the hell was that?” Ron followed.

“Can I collapse now?” Draco said, deadpan.

“I think you have all earned your rest Mr. Malfoy,” Dumbledore said, approaching them.

“Sir,” Harry said, gently disengaging from Hermione, “what about Voldemort? Shouldn’t we go after him?”

“I’m sure he is already gone Harry,” Dumbledore said, “and we both know neither I nor you can defeat him yet. He is, at the moment, out of our reach. I’m sure you know that, otherwise you wouldn’t have lured him into a Priori Incantatem, would you?”

“Right,” Harry said.

“That’s why you taunted him?” Hermione asked, eyes wide.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “Well, that, and it was fun.”

Draco smirked at Harry, who returned it.

“And the Death Eaters?” Neville asked.

“I’m sure all that can be apprehended will be,” Dumbledore replied.

“Speaking of Death Eaters,” Draco said, looking over his shoulder, “someone should tie him up.”

“Isn’t that Blaise Zabini?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah,” Draco said, looking at Ginny, who was still curled up in Ron’s embrace. “It is.”

“It was Blaise then?” Harry asked, looking at Draco.

“Yeah,” Draco replied, “he was the Death Eater.”

“I knew that bastard was evil,” Ron said.

“Oh shut up,” Neville said, “you say that about every Slytherin.”

Everyone but Ron and Ginny laughed.

(--)

Authors Note: Any questions you might have - please be patient. They will be answered in the next (and final) chapter, and if they aren’t, then feel free to ask away. Again, hope you all enjoyed. Sorry if it wasn’t the huge confrontation you expected, it just can’t happen yet, but rest assured it will. Thanks for sticking with my story! One more to go!

Piccolo999

Chapter Thirty-Five

The Aftermath of Voldemort's attack on Hogwarts was grave. Out of all the Order members who came to Hogwarts aid, seven died, and four were injured. Along with those Order members, quite a few of the Death Eaters suffered the same fate. Voldemort's attack on Hogwarts had severely injured his ranks.

Only a few students were injured during the attack, as it seemed Harry's companions did well in their mission to get the rest of the students clear of the battlefield without too much trouble. The only major injury was to Katie Bell, who used her own body to protect a group of First Years, but even that was not too serious. Madam Pomfrey declared she would make a full recovery.

The Death Eaters captured, including Blaise Zabini and Severus Snape, had been quickly imprisoned in the dungeons of Hogwarts and would soon be transferred to Azkaban, the wizard prison.

The day after the attack, Harry had a meeting with Dumbledore, where the Headmaster explained what had happened whilst Harry and the others stormed the Great Hall. Dumbledore told him how he had awoken to the sight of Horace Slughorn leaning over him, tipping a potion down his mouth. It turned out that the potions master had been researching the mysterious green potion that Dumbledore had drunk as well, and in fact, he had found the cure.

Slughorn told Dumbledore that he had stunned Snape and the two other Death Eaters with him when he arrived to find them attempting to transport his motionless body to the Great Hall. He'd then administered the potion and revived Dumbledore.

When Dumbledore told him this, Harry had grinned, thinking of the old potions professor who had finally been able to right his wrong. Granted, the old codger probably did it to save his own life more than Dumbledores, after all, he was a Slytherin. But either way, he had done a good thing, whatever his reason was for doing it.

Dumbledore also seemed a bit shaken up. After all, the man he had put his trust in, the man who he had stood up for, had finally shown his true colours. Snape tried to protest, saying he was just trying to

keep his cover, but there was just one too many things that didn't add up. He could no longer be trusted.

The Minister for Magic and a team of investigators arrived shortly after the attack and started to interrogate the entire school. After countless tales of how Voldemort had invaded the castle, the Minister for Magic had no choice but to accept it as fact, and the next day a public statement was issued.

Lord Voldemort was back.

(--)

The Hogwarts hospital wing was the busiest it had ever been since Voldemort was last active. Draco occupied the bed farthest from the door (at his own request, obviously). He still had trouble standing up, but he had at least managed to walk around the grounds a little yesterday before his energy left him. Madam Pomfrey didn't want to release him yet, but Dumbledore had made her agree to let him go tomorrow, with a promise from him not over exert himself.

Draco was sitting up, watching Harry, who was sitting at the bottom of his bed, reading a book. The doors to the hospital wing opened and Hermione (who was apparently Harry's girlfriend – when did that happen?) and Neville arrived, before being followed, strangely, by Ron and Ginny Weasley. Ginny had her head down, something Draco had noticed she did frequently these days. Before he could speculate on that any further, Hermione was upon them, eyes a blazing fire, her hands clutching a paper tightly.

"Can you believe this!?" she practically shouted, throwing the paper at Harry. Only Harry's Seeker reflexes save him from being hit in the face.

"What?" Harry asked.

Draco took in her flushed cheeks and mouth, set in such a firm line he was reminded forcefully of McGonagall, who in fact was lying in a bed not far away from them, still recovering from the unexpected stunner she had received during the attack.

“Read it!” Hermione said.

Harry looked at Neville, who motioned for him to do so wordlessly. As Harry opened the paper, Draco looked at Ginny, who was still staring at her feet. He noticed Ron looking uncomfortable, as if he would rather be anywhere than here, with them.

“Well?” Hermiones prodded.

“Let me read it,” Harry said, and for some reason he was grinning.

Draco was becoming really worried about his best friend. It was something he noticed a lot these days, when he watched the couple interact. Even if Hermione were scolding him, Harry would smile. It was like nothing she could do would make him angry. At least, that’s how it looked. It was pretty weird.

“You don’t need to read it!” Hermione yelled, before covering her mouth and looking around the rest of the hospital wing, blushing at her outburst. “You don’t need to read it,” she repeated, quietly this time, “just read the headline.”

“*Dark Lord vs. Dark Lord – Potter trying to get rid of the competition?*” Harry read, before turning his head to look at Hermione.

“So?” Hermione pressed.

“So what?” Harry said. “Hermione, ignore it. I expected this kind of thing to happen.”

“But it’s outrageous!” Hermione hissed quietly. “You were saving everyone and they still managed to turn it around on you. Doesn’t it bother you?”

“No,” Harry said, though Draco thought he saw a hint of something flash in Harry’s eyes, but it was gone too quickly to tell for sure. Either way, he thought Harry might not be telling the whole truth. “They can think what they want about me. All I care about is what the people close to me think of me. After all, why should I care what anyone else thinks? They don’t affect me.”

Hermione sighed. "I'm not going to win am I?" she said.

"Nope," Harry grinned.

"I want to talk about this later," Hermione said, "in private. Okay?"

"Okay," Harry said. "But you know I won't back down, don't you?"

"Neither will I," Hermione shot back, smiling at him. Harry smiled back.

"You two suck," Draco spoke for the first time.

"Shut it," Harry said, leaning forward and messing his hair up. "You're just jealous 'cos you don't have a great girl like Hermione."

Draco was about to shout at Harry for messing his hair up, but after hearing what his best friend said, he quickly lost his anger and the sadness returned. He looked at Ginny, who apparently had heard what Harry said as well, because she was looking at him for the first time since the attack. Their eyes met and locked for a moment, before Ginny lowered hers again. Draco hung his head as well, defeated. It seemed like she was still disgusted with him.

Normally, he would have been angry. After all, he'd gone through hell for her and she still wouldn't look him in the eye? He'd probably have said something along the lines of: 'If she can't forgive me after all I went through, then I don't want anything to do with the ungrateful bitch!', but he just didn't feel it. It was like someone had put out the fire that normally burnt deep in his soul, fuelling his passion.

"So what do we do now?" Neville asked.

"I don't know," Harry answered, "but I know one thing. From here on out, things are going to change. Voldemort is back and the world has realised this. It's a completely different game now. He's not going to be keeping a low profile anymore. Bad things are going to happen and we're right in the middle of it."

"But we'll be okay, won't we?" Hermione said.

"Truthfully," Harry said, "I really don't know..."

(--)

Authors Note: And that's that. I know, it's so short, but I really didn't have a lot to say in this chapter. The sixth year is now over and Voldemort is back. The sequel will be the seventh year. It's going to be a lot more hardcore than this one. Like Harry said, bad things are going to happen. Be warned, a lot of people will die in the next story. I'm not going to pussy foot around like JK Rowling. I'll try to post the first chapter of the sequel soon, but it might be a while. Then again, it might not, so you'll just have to wait and see. It depends on whether I want to take a small break or not, or whether the story will just pull me back in. Review people, cos that's your chance to motivate me with your awesome comments. Thanks a lot everyone, hope you all enjoyed. See you on the next one, I hope!

Piccolo999